



# CAN I HAVE A CHOCOLATE MILKSHAKE?

AN AWE INSPIRING  
TRUE STORY OF  
AN ARMY OFFICER

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# **Dedication**

To my Dad, I cherish every memory of you To My Mom, you've always been my source of inspiration To my Sister, thanks for being the person you are image-CYUJRT9I.png

To my beloved “better” half, without “YOU” this would not have been possible

To my angelic little one, you are our “love divine”

image-CYUJRT9I.png

To all my brothers in arms

and

To everyone who touched my life, was inspired, and inspired me to write this book

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# Prologue

“Chest No.22,” an officer announced as all candidates sat tensely in a room, awaiting the results of the National Defence Academy (NDA) SSB interview.

There was a gap of three long seconds, as the officer cleared his throat. Those seconds seemed longer than one light year each.

“Dude, what if you don’t make it,” thoughts were fleeting through my mind, “What will you do, what next?”

“Cut the crap and pay attention Siddhant,” I scolded my mind, and focused on the officer.

“Chest No.10,” he announced. There was more applause. The sound of clapping however, had come down from the first announcement, as those between No.21 and No.11 realized the inevitable. My heart started thumping loudly, as if on a ten thousand watts speaker.

“Chest No. 7,” the golden words came out finally. I stood up with a humble smile, to the mellifluent sound of applause well earned.

Well, it turned out that the clapping was coming from the TV, and I woke up with a smile on that Sunday morning.

“What are you smiling at?” Shreya, my better half asked looking straight at me, as beautiful as ever.

“Nothing much,” I said, opening my eyes wide, “just woke up with a pleasant memory from the NDA SSB days.”

“That’s nice,” she said thoughtfully, and pointed towards a page in the Sunday Times, “let’s go for this movie in the evening today. Even, Rishika would enjoy it.”

“Your wish is my command ma’am,” I chuckled, and looked at our ~1.5yrs old daughter, now standing playfully on my stomach. I thanked God for giving me what he has, and kick-started the day.

Almost sixteen years had gone by since the SSB days. I had gone through the arduous training in NDA & IMA, lived the life of an Army officer, fallen in love, had a death defying accident, lost my right shoulder and left the Army. I took up the reins of my life; started writing with left hand, competed for CAT & GMAT, and experienced infidelity. I then went on to make it to the ISB

& IIM-A—two of the best B-schools of the country, fell in love again and “passed-out” from IIM-A. Sh\*t happens, Forrest Gump had said in the mid-nineties. Life goes on —my blog added on to it, years after that.

Few hours later, I was sipping coffee in a CCD, narrating my story to a few college students, for their Cultural Magazine. It had indeed been an exciting rollercoaster ride on this Sine curve of Life.

### Nda: The Climb Begins

Watching the rising sun always brings to mind, the dawn of new possibilities. Every morning these days, I go for a morning run and look at the sun arising from far distance. Is today going to be the day I receive my NDA call letter? I had already gone through the rigorous five-day Services Selection Board (SSB) interview, and it was only a matter of making it to the merit list now. I looked at the serenity of the clear blue skies, and wondered if this very moment, Dad was showering his blessings from up above. Half an hour later, I reached home.

“Siddhant, you’re taking Vanshika to her friend’s place today, right?” Mom asked, as I came out of the shower. Vanshika was my cute little sister, four years younger to me.

“Sure Mom,” I replied with a smile, looking at Vanshika arranging her books, and continued, “as long as...”

Before I could finish, the bell rang and I dashed to the door.

Something told me, it was the postman. Well, it was!

“Mom, it’s my call letter,” I said exuberantly, and opened the envelope quickly; “I made it.”

“Congratulations my boy,” she said, hugging me warmly.

“What does it say?” she asked, bringing some sweets to offer to the postman.

“Well, other than the official part of the letter, they’ve given the answer I was looking for.”

The text said in bold, on top of the letter— “**YES, YOU HAVE IT IN YOU.**” The earlier mail I had received before the SSB interview had the following in the brochure—“ You’ve been shortlisted amongst thousands. Now we’re looking for the chosen few...**DO YOU HAVE IT IN YOU?**”

“It says I need to report to NDA by 1500hrs, 10 th July 1999,” I continued, “this gives us ten days. They’ve given a list of things to be brought—white towels, white shorts and shirts, and some more items.”

“Shopping starts today,” Vanshika exclaimed, snatching the letter from my hand and hiding it behind her; “treat time!”

“Sure sis,” I said, rushing to get it back as she playfully ran to another corner of the house.

“Mom, I’m going to the National Defence Academy,” I said after a while, bursting with energy and enthusiasm as the feeling sunk in.

“Yes Siddhant and we are all proud of you,” she said with mixed emotions, and gave me a tight hug.

For a moment, I felt sad as the reality struck me. I was going to be away from Mom and Vanshika, and NDA was only the beginning.

However, I knew what I was signing up for, and remembered Dad in his uniform with shining medals for inspiration. Yes, this is what I had always wanted in life. After giving a few chocolates to my sweet sis, I bought my letter. I had come to the end of the road I had been traversing all along, and saw a thought balloon pop into my mind. It said—“Dude, from here, the climb begins.”

My alarm went off at around 6 a.m., or maybe I should now say 0600hrs as per military verbiage. The train was on time and Pune station was to arrive at 0830hrs. This 24-hour clock routine was surely going to take some time to settle in. I took one good look at others in my compartment going about their morning routines, sipping tea, and reading the newspaper. It was raining hard and I hoped that the compartment stops in the shaded area of the platform. I had one huge black trunk with my name written on it, and a suitcase. I somehow managed to drag the heavy trunk down to the station and went to the boarding point. Within a few hours, around 30 cadets had gathered. The staff had met the critical mass to leave for NDA.

“Hi, I’m Siddhant,” I said to two other cadets loading their luggage into the bus, which was of typical Olive Green (OG) Army color.

“Hi Siddhant, I’m Vikas and this is Sameer,” one of them said.

Vikas was a tall guy, with a bright boyish charm on his face.

Sameer had a look of anxiety, as he saw other cadets arrive. His relatively large waistline probably didn’t help his confidence either.

“What a welcome to Pune, right? Awesome weather,” I said.

“Yeah, raining like anything,” Vikas said, helping me push up the trunk.

“Guys let’s go inside, lest this pouring rain drench us in this sweet summer sweat,” Sameer said, opening into a smile finally.

“Hotel California, huh!” I said, humming that line from the classic song, “Yeah, let’s take the final step inside.”

One hour into the bus journey, we reached the outskirts of the city and I saw a sharp U-turn, which was the beginning of the academy. We were now in Khadakwasla (location of NDA).

“Guys, this place where we turned is Chandni-chowk. The academy gate is around 2-3 kms from here,” Vikas shared. “My brother “passed-out” from NDA two years back.”

“Share some tips and tricks with us today Vikas,” Sameer said to him with hope. There was a mild storm brewing in our stomach as we went closer towards the academy.

“Whoa! Saw the text on that board?” I exclaimed, as a big signboard came up after a while.

“First view of NDA 50 ft. ahead,” we said together, and looked ahead intensely in anticipation. The bus continued uphill until the top. We then saw the dome and roof, of what was a magnificent piece of architecture.

“That’s Sudan Block,” Vikas chuckled with a sense of familiarity in terms of the knowledge dump his brother had given. “It’s the administrative building with all the main offices and most of the academic classes,” he continued.

The bus went past the main gate, and entered the endless sprawling campus.

“That’s the Equitation area, where we’ll have our horse riding classes,” Vikas said, pointing towards the left at a large compound with a horseshoe shaped gate.

“Horses have a right of way,” Sameer said, pointing towards the inscription on a signboard.

“Now that’s interesting,” I chuckled, and tried to see if there are any horses in the vicinity. Well, there were none. We then crossed a line of shops,

arranged in a big circle.

“Oh, some shops, that’s nice,” I said and promptly threw in a comment, “What is this, a Gole market?”

“Yup,” Vikas said with half a grin, “this in fact, is called the ‘ Gole market.’”

Soon we landed at the de-boarding point, which was the Cadets’ Mess. An Army personal had a look at our Identity proofs, and asked us to take our luggage to a building in front of the Mess.

This was the E Squadron—Echo Squadron. The rain had thankfully slowed down, and made it easier to drag our trunks and luggage.

The Squadron was empty and we decided to regroup at 2000hrs for dinner. We were all carrying a set of formal plain shirt, black trouser and shoes. After keeping the luggage, we got ready for dinner.

“Hey Vikas, so tell us what we should know before the formal Squadron allocation starts tomorrow,” I enquired.

“Basically, it’s a total of six terms of five months each, with around 20 days of term breaks. NDA is divided into 15 Squadrons—

Alpha, Bravo and onwards until Oscar (A to O).”

“Tomorrow morning we’ll get allocated to one of these,” Vikas said, continuing his monologue as we walked towards the Mess.

“Also, there are four Battalions with 1 st , 2 nd and 3 rd Battalions having four Squadrons each and the 4 th Battalion with only three.”

“Okay, so this Echo Squadron is in 2 nd Battalion then?” I asked, trying to grasp everything (this is where we were staying tonight).

“Yes,” he continued, “Echo, Foxtrot, Golf and Hunter.”

“Thanks for all these data points,” said Sameer, who was walking silently all this while, probably tensed about what was going to happen tomorrow.

The Mess was colossal with a countless number of tables extending in both directions. We met some other First term cadets, had a quick dinner and came back to the E Squadron building.

“Come here you three, are you strolling in a park?” someone hauled out, when we came near the building. We looked at the door, all windows of the building and all over, but couldn’t locate the source of the voice.

“Over here,” the voice shouted from the right corner of the top floor—the 2nd floor. We started walking towards that edge of the building.

“Double up!” he screamed angrily. We looked quizzically at each other.

“Come running, you lazy bozos,” he shouted. “Wait there, I’m coming down.”

“Are the senior cadets here already?” I asked Vikas, as we saw the person with that voice moving away from the window.

“Some cadets have shorter term breaks, they go late or come early to complete punishments, failed academic/physical tests,” he continued. “No wonder he sounds disgusted.” The senior was down in a moment.

“This is the last day I’m seeing you slimy piece of shitheads walking in my Squadron parade ground like this,” he said, very distinct in his tone and diction. “This is the Echo Squadron, not some wildlife sanctuary that you’re visiting for pleasure.”

We were getting a bit nervous now. What was going to happen next?

“Now get out of my sight, and don’t be seen till tomorrow morning,” he grumbled. “And I dare you not; do not use the central staircase, use only the left and right corner staircases.”

We ran into the building before his sentence ended.

“Vanish!” we heard the voice snarling at us in the background.

“One more thing,” Vikas whispered to us, after reaching the other end of the corridor. “It’s all about privileges here—privileges you get after reaching a particular term. Using central staircase is 6 th term privilege, all 1 st to 5 th termers use the two staircases at either ends of the corridor.”

“Thanks Vikas, let’s call it a day,” I said, having had enough information already.

We went to our cabins, still visibly shaken from the (thankfully) brief interaction with the senior, and got mentally prepared for tomorrow—the first official day at NDA.

The alarm rang up promptly in the morning and I was up for the big day. It was 0810hrs and a swarm of cadets was already standing in front of the Mess.

“Hey Siddhant,” Vikas called out from behind.

“Hi Vikas, good morning,” I replied. The process had started and we joined the line.

“The Adjutant , sitting over there is one of the most feared officers at NDA,” he said. “His name is Major Ranvir Rai, SM. He is in charge of the discipline of cadets, and gives all punishments, amongst other things.”

“Okay, he has received a Sena Medal (SM), impressive!” I exclaimed, adjusting my shirt to fall in line with the trouser. I looked at the terror emanating figure sitting on the table, more clearly now, with a new perspective. “The Hindi word for Adjutant is dand-pal ,” he continued.

No wonder, I thought mentally, and we kept going ahead with the flow. My turn came in about twenty minutes.

“What’s your name cadet?” the Major asked in a straight voice.

“Siddhant Mishra, sir.”

“Cadet Siddhant Mishra, do you have a preference for any Squadron?” he asked, looking through some documents. Maybe he saw in my documents that Dad was also an Army officer.

Is this a trick question? I wondered, thinking of whether my answer will have any disastrous consequences. I played a safe bet (having no clue or choice anyway).

“No sir.”

“You will be in Foxtrot Squadron, carry on” the Adjutant said, indicating me to go to other staff personnel handling some documentation.

I moved on to the corner while Vikas came in. I noted down my new identification, which was going to stay by me for a long time to come—2xxxx/F/102. 2xxxx was my serial number, the squadron was Foxtrot and Course number was 102. Vikas got into Mike Squadron, and we parted ways for now since Mike was further away.

“Are you in Echo,” another Echo senior asked, as I entered the E Squadron to take my luggage.

“No sir, I’m in Foxtrot.”

“Oh good, you’re in our Battalion itself,” he said pleasingly.

“Take your luggage and meet your 5 th term Sergeant in Foxtrot.

He would be wearing a KD—Khaki Dress with three red color V-shape stripes on his right arm sleeve.”

It was nice to see a pleasing behavior from this senior, quite contrary to the one from that disgust-spewing monster of yesterday. Foxtrot was right next to Echo, and I had one good look at the magnificent building. From an aerial view, the Squadron would have been of the shape of a rectangle with one long side missing, i.e. the letter ‘E’ without the bar in the center (in fact, all Squadrons were that way). The area in between was the Squadron parade ground. Above the entrance door, was the letter F written with a red

and yellow background (separated diagonally). The red color stood for 2nd Battalion, and yellow for Foxtrot.

“Are you in Foxtrot Squadron?” asked a senior who was wearing the dress described earlier. Khaki shirt, Khaki shorts, black belt, black shoes & stockings, a headgear on top and three red pointed arrow stripes on his right arm sleeve.

“Yes sir, I’m Siddhant Mishra.”

“You’re now Cadet Siddhant Mishra. I am Sergeant Awasthi, get your luggage inside,” he said in a pleasing manner. He then went through a list and continued, “Go to the second floor from the left end of the corridor, and keep your stuff in cabin number 211. Come down at 1030hrs sharp.”

At 1020hrs, I came down to the central lobby and met other first termers. In a few minutes, everyone assembled. There were 16 of us in all.

“Quite there, all of you,” Sergeant Awasthi said to all of us sternly. “We’ll now get your kit issued. Walk in two lines and don’t create a ruckus.”

“Hey, ikkis are here,” said a cadet coming in with his backpack (

ikkis stood for 1st termers). Today the rest of the academy was to come in and tomorrow onwards, the classes were starting.

“Yippee! ikkis are here,” chuckled another one coming from behind.

“Guys, I’ll meet you all after lunch,” said the Sergeant and they exchanged a few quick stories. Apparently, they were course-mates. We just stood there; mute with expectation and in anticipation. We then left for issue of kits, which comprised of the entire wardrobe that we were going to use in NDA. There were at least five types of shoes—white PT shoes, DMS boots, Drill boots, Horse-riding shoes and Black OP (Oxford Pattern) shoes. We dragged the entire kit back to the Squadron.

“First termers, wait here in the lobby, the CSM would talk to you,” said a terrified cadet coming in, while we kept our kits in a corner.

“Sir, what is a CSM?” I asked him, trying to understand the reason for his shaky voice.

“Okay, here’s the thing,” he said in a hurry, and then stopped abruptly.

“Keep shut you ikki , what’s your name?” he shouted at one of the other first termers, giggling about something.

“Sir, Cadet Mukul.”

“What’s your full name?”

“Sir, Cadet Mukul Garg.”

“Garg, shove those teeth up your a\*\* and stop smiling,” he said disdainfully.

“Okay, now my name is Cadet Vinod Kohli and I’m a 3 rd termer. We will have a session with you all tonight but for now just understand that the SCC —Squadron Cadet Captain and CSM—Company Sergeant Major, are 6 th term appointments and run the Squadron.

There are many other appointments in 4 th , 5 th , 6 th terms, but this is enough for now.”

Within five minutes, all 3 rd termers also gathered, and we were all standing in the “ground floor central lobby”—the GFCL. The

SCC came shortly, not a wicked or horrifying looking fellow, but quite smart. So was the CSM, who followed him. They stood on the second step of the central staircase and gave us a briefing on what was going to happen in the next few days. Three other sixth termers joined them.

“Hey all ikkis , introduce yourself,” said one of them, with a smile of an eagle about to pounce on its prey.

“Guys, hold on for a second and let me finish off the formal announcements,” the CSM intervened.

For some reason, a sudden shiver went down our spine and we wanted the CSM to stay. Several voices started coming in from the second floor, as more 6 th termers came down from the central staircase and gathered to see the fresh faces.

“Okay, 3 rd termers,” the CSM said with a pause, looking at the entire course, “Tomorrow, I want all 1 st termers ready after breakfast at 0800hrs for bike collection. Sergeant Awasthi will take them for issuing of bikes, and the pending items,” he concluded, collecting his papers. Apparently, for all practical purposes, the 3 rd termers were responsible for all 1 st termers.

“Yes sir,” the loud affirmative response came from the 3 rd termers.

“Okay, 1 st termers, now you have a nice night and think about which bike you want,” said one of the 6 th termers. “You, left of the khalsa, what ‘cc’ bike do you prefer?”

“Sir, I would like to have at least a 150cc bike,” the innocent response said.

“Of course, why not, 3 rd termers see to it that they get what they want. Things are very far in NDA and 150cc bike would definitely help.”

“Yes sir,” came the response again in unison, some of the 3 rd termers were smiling.

It sounded too good to be true, biking down these roads. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Nevertheless, the thought per se was worth it.

“Right... Sergeant Kohli!” the CSM called out to a 5 th term Sergeant walking down the corridor.

“Yes sir!”

“Take care of these guys,” he said and the 6 th termers dispersed slowly, looking enthusiastic about entering the final term at NDA.

“Okay,” Sergeant Kohli paused, and looked at all the 3 rd termers. “How many 1 st termers are there?”

“16, sir,” said a few of them promptly.

“Has anyone made the ‘nominal roll’ yet?”

There came a deafening silence. None of us spoke. I was standing behind in our line and saw a few 3 rd termers whispering to each other.

“3 rd termers, I had told Sharma to have the ‘nominal roll’ ready by this time. Where is it?”

None of them moved an inch, and they were probably cursing that Sharma guy, whoever he was. I’m sure none of us ikkis had a clue of what it was.

“Okay fine, 1 st termers one of you announce the names of your course-mates,” he said to us and continued. “Sharma, step out of the line and note all the names on the back of your course

‘nominal roll.’ ”

Sharma sir came out with a small page and a ball-pen refill in hand. He was a short and funny looking senior, and had timid facial expressions. He looked at me, since I was the closest and said meekly—“tell me the names.” I looked around and started from the first row.

“Ritesh Chaddha, Vishal Paul, SD Singh, Sandeep Sharma, Mukul Garg, Varun Malhotra, Bikram Singh Dhimman, Prateek Verma, Rahul Shukla, Sanjay Tiwari, Neeraj Singhania, Vipul Garje, Aditya Bhalla, Vikas Malhotra, Namgay Yeshi and Siddhant Mishra,” I said, surprisingly getting the names right. I was never good with names. Namgay Yeshi was one of the four cadets in 102 course from Bhutan.

“3 rd termers, by tomorrow morning I want 10 copies of the 102

course, and 2 nd to 6 th term ‘nominal rolls’ at any time, with each of the ikkis ,” he said furiously to 3 rd termers. He then looked at the entire bunch and shouted, “all 3 rd termers move to the Battalion area, and 1 st termers fu\*\* off.”

We picked up our kits, ran away helter-skelter, and some of us got together inside Chaddha's cabin, which was on the 2nd floor.

"Guys, let's quickly make this list of names. I'm sure 3rd termers are going to come back to us after this," Sandeep Sharma said.

"I don't think the tikkis are coming back for us tonight," said Garje, looking out of the window, which was facing the Battalion area. Without making it obvious, we tried to peep through the half-closed window and could see 3rd termers getting rogered.

"My goodness, today's the first day and look at their state," I exclaimed.

"Yeah well, I'm not sure how many of you all know but here's the thing," Shukla said, "we are going to get 3rd term 'over-studies' tomorrow. We would be their 'under-studies'. Essentially whatever wrong we do, the respective over-study will face the brunt, and in turn you know who."

Chaddha closed his window completely, without making noise and continued, "What I know is—ikkis, dukkis and tikkis do not have the privilege of walking inside the Squadron."

"4th termers are called chaukey, 5th termers are punjey," I shared and continued, "and the mind blowing part is that 6th termers are actually called chhakkey."

All of us burst into a silent laughter, and chatted for a while.

"Guys, lights-out is at 2200hrs. No one should be seen out of his cabin after that," Bhalla said.

"It's almost time," I said and we got up. The door banged open suddenly and a tikki came in.

"Bloody ikkis," Cdt. Sharma sir came in saying.

He was in a bad shape. Although it did seem he had washed up before coming to us; there were telltale signs of what had happened. "Oh shucks!" we all thought.

“You want to look at your pops getting punished? All of you report to me tomorrow morning 0400hrs in PT rig, cabin no. 223,”

he said. After a thoughtful moment he added, “PT rig is the green jersey issued to you and the white shorts, shoes and OG socks—

essentially what I’m wearing right now.” Suddenly his tone had changed from one of anger, to a tone of preaching.

“Keep one pair of PT rig for Squadron punishments and others for PT—Physical Training classes. Your uniforms should always be spic and span. Don’t get late for any class, any punishments or anything for that matter. Don’t show doubts to your seniors.

Doing all this will not make your life easy,” he said with a deliberate pause, and a wicked smile. “You are going to get punished— nice and proper , one way or the other. But your journey will become a bit smoother.”

Suddenly a loud announcement came up from the center of the Squadron, “Pay attention Fighter Squadron—lights-out Fighter Squadron—lights-out Fighter Squadron.” This was a 2 nd termer announcing the lights-out, i.e. (officially) time to go to sleep.

“Right, ikkis , fu\*\* off to your cabins and don’t be seen outside.”

I ran to my cabin, which was on the 2 nd floor itself. With the lights switched off and moonlight dripping in, I had the first good look at my cabin. There was a bed with rods for a mosquito net, and it was taut with two white bed-sheets and a black blanket tucked in. There was one study table, one chair, one maroon color rug on the floor, one table lamp and bookrack, one cupboard for clothes and a shoe rack. I looked out of the window at the empty sky and somewhere down the line, gave in to the drowsy eyes.

## Life It Can Be Hard

There was suddenly a shattering roar of a drilling machine.

Probably some builders were digging into impregnable rocks. I wondered what was happening; I had just gone to sleep a few hours back. More importantly, what was I doing in the middle of a construction site with people using a drilling machine? Well, it was my alarm clock and it was 0350hrs.

“Siddhant coming?” someone asked with a hoarse voice, opening my cabin door.

At 0400hrs sharp, we were all there in front of Sharma sir’s cabin.

“Is everyone here?” he asked from inside, after hearing the knock.

“Yes sir,” all of us replied.

“Stand in a formation, strike the names off the nominal roll, and give it to me,” he said with a weary voice. For some reason I just took the initiative and started cutting the names. It turned out Dhimman was missing.

“Guys, where is Dhimman?” I asked no one in particular.

“Oh, how did we miss him, he’s the only khalsa in the batch,”

Bhalla said, stepping out “I’ll just go get him.” At that instant, the tikki came outside.

“Come here,” he shouted, trying to recollect Bhalla’s name,

“where do you think you’re going?”

“Sir, Dhimman is not here.”

“But you guys said everyone’s here. Who was the one who said yes, when I asked that question?”

Pin-drop silence, no one spoke. He turned and looked at me, and the nominal roll in my hand.

“Mishra and Bhalla, get front rolling,” he said.

I thought—“What? What did I do? I was just cutting names.” I took this as the first lesson—never volunteer. We sat down in an

“on the marks get-set-go” position and didn’t know what to do next.

“Oh, so the kings of Spain and Portugal don’t know how to roll, right?”

I looked up at him, and then at my course-mates, and then at Bhalla. Obviously none of us knew, or at least the non-Sainik school types and non-RIMC types didn’t know.

“Get up both of you.”

I thought—“Oh thank God, I don’t know rolling.”

“Shukla, sit down and get rolling, Tiwari follow him and show a demo to your course-mates.”

We looked at them doing one front roll, then the 2nd one, and then the 3rd one. Both of them had come from a “Sainik school”.

“That’s it, get up,” he said, “Now all of you sit down and start rolling to Dhimman’s cabin.”

This was the start of our first rolling session at NDA. Around 0450hrs, he left us to get ready in time for morning muster.

Sometime later, the reveille siren went off; as if that is when we were supposed to wake up.

“Mishra, when you go for bath, wear your night dress and dressing gown over it. Also, remember that you should never step out of your room without your dressing gown, if your dress is incomplete,” Kirti sir said to me. Kirti sir was my next-door tikki, and was one of the seemingly good guys amongst the 3rd termers.

“Sir, what do you mean by dress is incomplete?”

“Your PT dress is complete only when you wear everything including the shoe laces. Your drill dress is incomplete if you forget to even wear your headgear—your beret, got the point?”

“Yes sir,” I said, going in to change for a quick shower.

Stepping into the bathroom, I moved towards the bathing area. For a moment, I couldn’t believe what I saw. There were around six showers in one straight line, there was no partition in between, all in the open and four seniors were bathing there—in the nude.

“Come inside you ikki , don’t stand and stare at us,” said one of the seniors.

I hung my towel, still shocked at the sight, and thought about what to do next.

“What’s your name and who is your over-study?” he asked, coming out of the shower, drying himself up and wrapping around the towel. By his confidence, I knew that he was a 6 th termer.

“Cadet Mishra sir, Siddhant Mishra,” I stuttered.

“Oh, so you’re ‘Bond, James Bond,’ ” he asked, smiling to others.

“Never mind that,” he said, amused at his own joke, “see, we all take bath like this, and it’s not optional. You need to shed all your inhibitions. Few years from now, you’ll be stuck in the jungle with your men some time. After days of being in unhygienic conditions, when you get a chance to take bath, we don’t want you to ask your men to close their eyes. This starts right here, go in and no second thoughts.”

I took a deep breath, as he went away. What he said did make sense while he was speaking, but now when it came to actually taking off everything, I hesitated.

“What the hell,” I thought, and within seconds, I was in the shower. Others just went in and were out quickly, they had to go for classes. I had just taken the next step towards breaking my pre-NDA mental barrier.

After breakfast, we got our bikes issued. These were not 150cc bikes of course, but normal bicycles. After a long wait, we also got the zero-cut haircut, and bid farewell to our hairs. In the evening, I met my over-study, a smart khalsa —Sahni sir. It turned out that he was my place-type pal.

“Mishra, now that you’re my pal, just make sure you don’t come on the wrong side,” he said coming into my room, and looking at the way I had arranged my cupboard. “Nobody will touch you since you are just an ikki , that’ll be below their dignity. Simply put, if you make a mistake, they’ll sort me out, and the same will happen to you. It starts with you and ends with you.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to grasp this fact.

As a pal Sahni sir, couldn’t have punished me, so that part was assigned to another 3 rd termer.

“See, don’t get tensed,” he said, “It’s not that if you don’t make a mistake you won’t get punished. You’ll invariably get rogered one way or the other. That’s how you will be born into the academy.”

“What else should I know sir?” I asked him, offering a box of sweets from home.

“Oh thanks a lot, I’ve also brought some. We’ll have that later,”

he said, now settling down on my bed. “See, there are two rules in NDA, first—‘the senior is always right.’”

“Okay,” I said, enjoying this conversation with my first pal in the academy.

“And second—‘in case of any doubt, refer rule one,’” he said amusingly with his mustaches smiling away. “Never show doubts, give your seniors the respect that they’ve earned—nothing more, nothing less. No one can manhandle you, and nobody is a servant here. If anyone troubles you on that, go to the CSM. But other than that, don’t show any doubts.”

He rambled on.

“You would be born in the academy only after completing your camps in the 2 nd term,” he said, “which so happens, is also when you complete around nine months in NDA.”

“Hey Sahni,” a 3 rd termer called out, and came into my cabin, “I need your OG Jersey for...” he stopped midway and looked at me. I looked up and gave a dumbfounded expression.

“Siddhant Mishra!” he exclaimed.

“Ashish Verma!” I exclaimed in return, and went and hugged him.

We were together in Class 10 th , in Chandigarh and seeing him in NDA, that too two courses senior to me was awesome.

“Oh great, he has two pals amongst Squadron 3 rd termers itself,”

Sahni sir chuckled, and moved out of the room leaving us to catch up on things.

In the evening, it turned out that one of the ikkis had inadvertently dared to walk inside the Squadron, instead of running . Soon enough, there was an announcement from the central lobby. This time though, the voice sounded familiar, it was SD

Singh.

“Pay attention Fighter Squadron—all first termers—sprint down to—

Ground Floor Central Lobby—immediately, immediately, immediately.”

Three immediately announcements meant wherever you are, just fly away to the point as announced without fail. We all came sprinting down. A 5 th term Sergeant handed us over to 3 rd termers, and that was the beginning of never ending front rolls.

“Stop talking first termers,” one of them said sternly, while we were rolling from one end of the corridor to another.

“Increase your speed, you’re not strolling with your girlfriend here,” shouted another one.

The 3 rd termers had spread themselves out across the corridor so that all of us received “personalized” attention.

After half an hour, we started back-rolling and then side-rolling, which was essentially lying down on the ground straight and rolling sideways. The last form of rolling was cream-rolling, which was one forward and one back , with repetitions until eternity.

“Get up all of you,” 3 rd termers shouted suddenly from across the corridor.

We heaved a sigh of relief and thought it was over. It turned out that it was just a 6 th termer passing by, and apparently, in front of a senior a junior cannot punish another junior.

“Oh, please sit down and continue,” the 6 th termer said, as if because of him a grand celebration had come to a standstill.

“First termers, learn the right way of rolling as early as possible. Do you know side-rolling is actually one of the quickest way of running without getting shot, when escaping on the ridge line of a mountain on enemy side?” the 6 th termer asked, with a look of surety.

We looked at each other. We’d been rolling and doing what not for I don’t know how many hours, and what he said didn’t make sense at this point.

“3 rd termers, please resume,” saying that, he walked away with a smile to his room in the right flank, leaving us to these cannibals. After dinner, 3 rd termers left us to ourselves for some reason, probably to get a breather for the classes from tomorrow.

Next day I got up at 0400hrs to clear my SSB, a new term I had learnt recently. This SSB was different from the SSB interview we underwent, and stood for— Shit, Shave, and Brush . There was a clearance time for 4 th termers from the bathroom, before which 3

rd termers had to finish off their SSB, and so on. During morning muster, a 3 rd termer checked our dresses for any imperfection.

We were all standing in the Squadron parade ground (area in the middle of the E-shape building structure).

“Has everyone come?” he asked.

“Yes sir!”

Soon, the entire Squadron was there. The muster was a spectacle per se . The CSM stood in the center, surrounded by a few 6 th termers and rest of the Squadron stood in a rectangular form.

“All Corporals come here,” the CSM announced, looking at the 4 th termers. Corporals were 4 th term appointments, the way there were Sergeants in 5 th term, and wore two V shape stripes instead of three, on the right arm sleeve.

Suddenly the 3 rd termers shouted, “Look up there!”

All the 3 rd termers started looking up towards the sky. 2 nd termers immediately followed suit and, we did the same.

“When a 6 th termer speaks to 5 th /4 th termer in a fall-in like this, all juniors are supposed to look up, and essentially act as if we’re unaware of what’s happening. Especially, when they get scolded,” someone whispered to the rest of us. I really couldn’t make out who said that, given the position of my head.

“Fu\*\*in ikkis look up,” one 3 rd termer exclaimed.

“Look towards Delta,” another 3 rd termer shouted loudly, probably acting out of anticipation that the course might get rogered because of ikkis not looking up properly.

Now this was ridiculous because Delta was right opposite of Foxtrot. We were standing facing the Squadron, and looking towards Delta meant the head making a vertical summer salt of 180

degrees.

“Break your neck fu\*\*ers,” another 3 rd termer said to all of us.

Apparently, these were standard dialogues.

Well, the look-up part finished finally, as the Corporals joined their course.

“One dukki come forward for NDA prayer, 3 rd termers I want ikkis to recite the NDA prayer from tomorrow,” the CSM announced. After some brief hesitation, one of them came forward.

“Oh God, help us to, keep ourselves, physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight, that in doing our duty, to thee and to our country...” the prayer went on. It was a long and inspiring prayer.

We soon left for our first class—PT. For the first two periods, we did some running, basic pushups, sit-ups etc. and got a brief of what our tests will be for 1 st term. After PT, we ran back to our Squadrons for bath + breakfast. I quickly got ready for our academic classes, which were to start at 0900hrs, and reached the Squadron gate.

“Shukla wait a minute,” I said, running down the staircase.

“Hey Mishra, we need two more to make the squad,” he said, and luckily two 2 nd termers came down to join us.

The squad concept gelled in well with the functioning of the academy. A cadet did not exist as a single entity. Wherever we went—be it running, marching, or on bicycles, there had to be a minimum of four to make a squad—two in front, two in back. These squads moved together with matching steps (even while running), matching hand swings (while marching), and in perfect synchrony.

We had a quick breakfast and at 0835hrs, a Sergeant started shouting and asking people to get out of the Cadets’ Mess. There was a long stretch of straight road called the—Trishul Marg, which led to the academic blocks. On the Trishul Marg, there was a long pillar with a roundel around it, right

in front of the picturesque Sudan Block—the Ashoka Pillar. For reaching the classes by 0900hrs, the clearance for the pillar was 0845hrs. We quickly sped away to our academic blocks.

At around 1130hrs, there was a tea break and we kept sitting in our Lecture Halls (LHs), everyone with their heads on the table trying to catch some sleep.

“102 F class, rise and shine,” a 6 th term appointment came in, banging his cane (issued to some of the 6 th term appointments), on the table. All of us rose from our chairs.

“What are you all doing inside, this is a tea break, right?” he asked.

“Yes sir,” said some of the guys sitting in the first row.

“Come outside, let’s have tea then,” he said smiling, looking at the area where the tea canisters lay. There were several 5 th term Sergeants making juniors do plank-type pushups, lot of cadets running around and 6 th term appointments punishing other 5 th termers.

“Come with me, and at least for today you guys can have tea easily,” he said and started walking ahead.

The prospect brought a couple of smiles, and we started moving out of the class in two files. It seemed as though there was a protective cloud around us, as we gradually passed through the carnage with vicious snakes that could only hiss but not harm.

“Hey Vikrant, are they all with you?” asked another 6 th term appointment. One could make out these appointments from the tabs they wore on their shoulders.

“Oh he’s the ACA, and there’s ACC behind him,” muttered one of my classmates.

“I’ve heard he’s a cool guy,” I said with an optimistic note. “As it is, only 5mins are left for the break to get over.”

The ACC and ACA were the senior-most appointments of the academy (Academy Cadet Captain/Adjutant) and were the most powerful (and feared ones) amongst all 6 th termers.

“First termers, not that I’m remotely interested in any way in dealing with you guys,” the ACA spoke again after a few minutes, rather sternly.

“Standing here, I can see some of you have dirty shoulder flashes, term badges are not shining, shoes haven’t been polished enough, etc.”

Suddenly his tone worsened and he gave a warning signal with the empty teacup in hand, “Your honeymoon period is over. Now fu\*\*

off to your classes, and don’t let me catch you again,” he finished and watched all of us scram away, throwing the half-empty cups in the dustbin.

The next lecture was of Mathematics. Somewhere down the line during the class, while I was figuratively dozing away on my bed, I heard an unfamiliar voice.

“Cadet Siddhant, Paras and Anurag, wake up.”

“Cadet Siddhant Mishra, get up!”

I stood up immediately, realizing that I was dozing off and this was the instructor’s voice.

“Sorry sir,” I fumbled with a few apologetic words, and saw the other two standing already, bleary eyed.

“Today’s the first class and you all are already sleeping?” he said, to no one in particular. “I know that cadets tend to sleep in classes, but not in my class,” he said.

I looked at another course-mate in the middle of the third row, whose head was moving back and forth slowly, while his neighbor was trying to pinch him constantly.

“All of you get up,” the instructor said to the class suddenly (somehow, the drowsy fellow got up too—promptly).

“Sit down,” he said, and we all sat down with a loud noise.

“Get up,” he went again, “sit down.” This is how the rest of the lecture went on. This was perhaps a keep-cadets-aware strategy that instructors had devised.

Within a few days, we blended in into the spine-chilling sweat-breaking strenuous life of NDA. On all Sundays, 1st termers had drill classes in the morning (obviously most of us had never taken much interest in the school march-pasts earlier). Only after clearing the DST—Drill Square Test, cadets could go to Pune city on Liberty. Liberty was the official permission to go out to Pune city for the day, with the requirement of reporting to Squadron—no later than 2000hrs. Having many cadets with a zero haircut, dressed smartly in academy tie and muftis was a common sight on Sunday for Pune city. Well, the first DST was many Sundays away. “Life is tough here” was an inordinately inaccurate

statement to make (and a rather toned down status-message to have, if Facebook or Twitter had been there in those days).

One night, we were all in the Cadets’ Mess and stood next to our Squadron tables, ready for the announcement to start the dinner.

“Mishra and Verma,” said a 3rd termer standing next to us,

“somehow you’ve always escaped from sitting next to me. You will have a good dinner today.”

We gulped, standing in our places on hearing that. There were privileges even while eating. As a junior, after every bite, one was supposed to leave the cutlery, sit straight (called sitting-up with a straight back, hands straight on the knees) and then chew. Then have the next bite, sit up and then chew again. Things did get better term by term. The dinner started and with a synchronized motion, the entire academy sat down while the waiters started bringing the soup.

“Verma,” the tikki said, “which is the only Squadron with two parade grounds and where’s the second one?”

This was the dreaded NDA GK questions series. There were all kinds of numbers that we were supposed to learn by heart—number of steps in front of Sudan block, height of Ashoka pillar, and what not.

“Our Foxtrot Squadron sir,” Verma said, “one is in the Squadron, and second one is the Khetrapal Parade ground.” The Academy Drill parade ground was named after 2 nd Lt. Arun Khetrapal PVC, who was a Foxy.

“Start your soup,” he said to Verma, and turned towards me.

“Mishra, how many paintings are there in the Mess,” he said to me, enjoying the soup while I looked at him, sitting up, and tried thinking hard.

“I don’t remember sir,” I said innocently.

“Oh you don’t? No issues turn your spoon upside down and have your soup.”

How sadistic people are, I wondered trying to see if I can at least taste the soup that way. Within minutes, it was time for the next course, and the waiters took away the soup.

“Verma, number of Ashoka trees in front of Sudan block?”

“16, sir,” Verma said.

“Mishra, what is the number of the best, and the fastest bike in NDA?” he asked.

“Sir, A-1 and F-16,” I said confidently, this was so obvious.

“Mishra, how many tube lights, and Verma, how many bulbs are there in the Mess?” he continued. We kept maintaining a sitting-up position, and gave a blank look. None of us knew the answer.

“Have two glasses of water,” he said to both of us, and started with another set of questions. That night we both had at least eight glasses of water each. After reaching the Squadron, there was another session of rolling, side-rolling, cream-rolling and what not. Things became grungy with most of us puking all over.

While sleeping at night, I just thought about how almost all of us had come in with huge egos, and the first thing the Academy did to us was—break our egos. We might have been school prefects, academic toppers and what not. In this place we were all equally lowly forms of life—diddly ikkis , not even born in the academy, rolling around here and there and running a survival spree.

### Life It Can Be Good

One of the following Sundays, I dressed up into muftis (black trouser white shirt, academy tie) for the weekly shopping, and a short break in the Gole market. This was the closest we were to people seemingly from another planet (i.e. normal civilians) and in that circular compound, there was no punishment given since civilians were around.

As a 1 st termer, on a Sunday one could be either getting punished, hiding in a senior pal’s cabin, sitting in the two juice bars, or hanging around in the Gole market. Either way, thinking of sleeping in your own room was equivalent to aiming an axe on your foot and sharpening that axe even more so. In fact, the concept of having pals was a necessary lifeline for the smooth functioning of life at NDA. There were school-type pals, place-type, name-type, birthday-type, and all kinds of pals. It gave juniors a chance to take lift (academy lingo for getting help or escaping from a punishment) when required. From Gole market, I went straightaway to our sister Squadron—Kilo Squadron.

“Hi, I’m a Foxy, Siddhant Mishra,” I said to an ikki coming out of the Squadron.

“Hi buddy, I’m Ravinder Vishwanathe,” he said with a smile,

“managed to get out of Foxtrot easily?”

Most of the Squadrons had a sister Squadron, i.e. where a junior could enjoy all the privileges. So one could potentially sleep in anyone's cabin, watch TV in the Anteroom, play billiards or do whatever he wants (typically, what one wanted was just—to sleep).

Ravinder was a dark, smiley and smart fellow, kind off on the heavier side. From his suspicious eyes looking here and there, it seemed he too was planning to run off somewhere and save his remaining Sunday.

“Oh yes, I got lucky today. Now I’m planning to have a good time in your Anteroom,” I said and extended my hands generally towards the Squadron, “so nice to be safe here.”

“Yes, that’s where I’m heading to as well, safe haven for me—

Foxtrot,” he said and looked behind to see if anyone was looking.

“A 3<sup>rd</sup> termer is after me since morning as it is.”

“Okay, see you then,” I said and went inside, while he vanished quickly.

After spending a few awesome hours, I reached Foxtrot with a packed bag of sweets for Bhalla (which I had promised to him earlier).

“Hey Bhalla,” I said trying to push into his cabin on the ground floor, and then stopped seeing the lock on the door. Perhaps he was not there. I turned around to run back to my cabin.

“Hey Mishra, I’m inside,” his voice suddenly hushed from inside the room.

“Oh, you are LIC?” I asked delightfully.

“Yeah, come inside from the Battalion area side (behind the Squadron), from my window.”

LIC in academy lingo meant “Locked-In-Cabin,” a strategy used by juniors to pretend they are not in the room, and have someone else lock their door. It generally worked, but sometimes seniors used to climb over the door and see from the banister (wire mesh) on top, if anyone was inside. We had the

eatables, caught up on lost sleep, and slipped out after it got dark, just before it was time for the Sunday night count-up.

“Thanks for this! By the way, tomorrow we have the Battalion 10m jump in the swimming pool,” Bhalla declared.

“What? I barely know swimming, leave alone jumping from diving boards,” I said, thinking of the dreadful Monday coming up.

“Yah, many of the 1 st termers are not swimmers, so I believe it’ll be optional for us.”

On Monday evening after classes, the entire Battalion with around 400 + cadets was sitting next to the pool—a swarm of zero cut figures in swimming trunks. All Foxtrot 1 st termers knew some basic swimming, so we decided as a course to go ahead and make that jump (easier said than done though).

“It shouldn’t be difficult, I guess people create a hullabaloo over 10m jump just like that,” I said to SD Singh. He was looking

at the first cadet from Echo climbing the staircase to the 10m level.

“Yeah, speak for yourself, have you ever jumped from the 10m board?” he asked, as the Echo cadet jumped with a splash.

“Not really, haven’t even climbed up to that point, but it doesn’t look that high, right?”

“Yeah it doesn’t but I’ve heard you get a new perspective of life when you reach the top,” SD said, smirking at the thought.

Many Cadets were hesitating, but in the end, everyone was jumping. Most of them shouted the Squadron name to get the final courage to go ahead and jump (some did that just for show). After sometime, came the first stall of the evening.

“Cadet Tyagi, jump!” the PT Instructor shouted from below.

The cadet just stood there at the edge with the look of a horrified Ostrich in close-up.

“Cadet Tyagi, jump!” the instructor shouted again.

All four Squadron Commanders and respective Divisional Officers (or Div-Os) of our Battalion were watching this from a corner. A prolonged minute passed by, and the Div-O of the cadet couldn’t take it anymore. He moved towards the deep end of the pool.

“Tyagi, jump,” he shouted up at the 10m board from below.

“Yes sir,” the cadet shouted loudly and moved forward, looked down, but stepped back.

“Don’t make me come up there Tyagi, look straight and jump. Don’t look down.”

“Yes sir,” he said and came to the edge, spent 10 seconds and sat down there itself.

The officer started climbing, and suddenly there was a splash.

Apparently, the fear of “what-if-I-do-not”, took over the fear of jumping—a wise choice.

Next in line was Foxtrot Squadron. I saw Garg going ahead for the jump, coolly climbing, hesitating for probably a second or two and then making the jump. I was next and got up confidently, it couldn’t be that difficult. I started climbing, bursting with confidence. As I was climbing, the 10m board seemed like a huge tower. After reaching the top, I was in a different solar system altogether. I looked around and could see the ginormous campus of NDA, extending into the mountains and valleys, numerous classy buildings and what not—all this in three seconds. Then I looked down at the minute ants below, and realized what SD meant by new perspective—all this in the next three seconds. I thought inside—

“dude do you even know where you are going to land, this pool looks so tiny, what if you fall outside on the floor?” From the top, the pool looked like a small mug, not even a bucket.

I decided not to look down, and thought aloud two lines from the Hanuman-chalisa prayer. It went— “Sab sukh lahaii tumhaari sarana, tum rakshak kaahu ko darna,” which meant that when God is there to look out for you, what’s there’s to worry about?

“Cadet Siddhant Mishra,” the PT instructor shouted from below, looking up my name in the list.

“ Ji sahab ,” I replied confidently in the affirmative in Hindi.

That was the mode of communication generally with the drill/PT instructors, who were all below officer rank.

“Jump,” he commanded, and blew the whistle.

I said in my mind—“ You got to do what you got to do .” I took four steps looking straight ahead, out of which the fourth was the one where there was nothing to step on. Within seconds (that seemed like long minutes mid-air), I was down with a splash.

Foxtrot was the only Squadron, in the second Battalion in which every 1 st termers had jumped off the 10m board today.

“1 st termers,” the CSM said to us in the Anteroom that evening, where the entire Squadron was there, “you guys made us proud today in front of the entire Battalion. Enjoy midterm mood for the next three days, you deserve it.”

“Yah-Yah,” other six termers exclaimed in the affirmative.

Our joy knew no bounds. Midterm mood meant that for the next three days, we had 6 th term privileges—no punishments inside the Squadron and all the privileges that 6 th termers have.

“1 st termers, well done and enjoy this time,” a tikki said to us afterwards.

“Just make sure you don’t create a problem with any senior, which you regret after the end of these 72hrs,” he finished with a distinct smirk on his face.

In a few months, the midterm break came and on the night prior to the break came the announcement we were all waiting for.

“Pay attention Fighter Squadron— midterm mood Fighter Squadron— midterm mood Fighter Squadron.”

The term— Midterm mood originally came from the midterm break period, where there was a holiday atmosphere for those staying inside the academy. Next day I got up early to go to the Gole

market, where I was going to receive—Mom, Vanshika, and Shruti didi , one of my cousin sisters. It was around 1100hrs when I saw the three alighting from the cab.

“Siddhant,” Mom exclaimed proudly, “my goodness, what have they done to my son.”

“Hi Mom, Vanshika, didi , so glad you could come,” I said exuberantly to each of them.

“I had to meet you and see this place at least once, before going abroad,” didi said.

“Bhaiya , you’ve become thin like a needle, all tanned up,”

Vanshika said, grinning away to glory.

“Very funny,” I said to her, “I’ll get my color back, once I ‘pass-out’ from here.” I said with hope and confident anticipation.

“Let’s go have something,” I said and we moved to the eateries. I could see that Mom was still looking at how much the Academy had changed her son.

After sometime, we reached the Squadron and I showed them around.

“Mom, this is Arun Sanyal sir, he’s also from Jabalpur,” I said introducing one of my 5 th term place-type pals.

“Hello ma’am, I hope you like this place,” Arun sir said.

“Yes Arun, so you’re going to pass-out next term? Your parents must be very proud.”

“Yes ma’am, waiting eagerly. Siddhant is also doing well and don’t worry, he’ll take care of himself,” he said, smiling at me.

“Mom, I’ll take you all to the juice bar, it’s in Golf Squadron, the next one,” I said and took them towards the Golf Squadron juice bar.

“So many smart guys; wish I had come here a few years back,”

Shruti didi said jokingly to mom.

“Really,” Mom said laughing away, “too late for you, too early for Vanshika.” Shruti didi was getting married in a few months.

We were now going to enter Golf Squadron and my happiness knew no bounds. Golf was the Pakistan Squadron for us (of course, so were we for them). We were archrivals. Foxies had to literally sprint to the juice bar while crossing through Golf (not just run), and many times Golfies had caught me before reaching the juice bar.

Today I was going to stroll away on their parade ground towards the juice bar with nothing to worry, since I had guests with me.

After that, we went to the café. I ordered us lunch and brought two plates full of small and cute Gulabjamuns .

“Siddhant, how will we eat 35 Gulabjamuns ?” Mom asked, looking bewildered.

“Oh, actually 20 are for me, and you all can have 5 each,” I winked.

The small Gulabjamuns here were the best I had ever had. As a practice, NDA cadets had the capacity of having an uncountable number in one go.

“You always had a sweet tooth Siddhant, but I guess now you can eat anything, and everything comes out of the body in your training,” Mom said happily, while I gobbled up.

“Yes mom, when I come home at the end of this term, you’ll see a different and improved version of me, I’m sure.” I said grabbing the last Gulabjamun

“So, is the life very difficult here?” Shruti didi asked.

“It’s great didi , a totally different life,” I said, “the words —‘strenuous’ and ‘difficult’ would really not do justice to it. ‘Breaking sweat’ would be more apt I guess.”

After some discussions on what was happening here and back at home, I took them to show other places. In a few days, the midterm break finished, and we were back to the grind.

One of the evenings during games, a Sergeant took us to the exercise area. Our final Physical Training tests were approaching.

“Okay, first termers show me your physical standards, we will start with the ropes,” a 5 th term Sergeant said to us. The rest of the Squadron was playing basketball.

“3 rd termers send me—Malhotra and Gupta,” the Sergeant called out to the 3 rd termers.

Both of them came and stood in attention before him.

“Relax,” the Sergeant said, and they came in stand-at-ease position smartly.

“Show them a demo of 3 rd class rope,” he said.

Both of them started climbing the rope in just the way our PT instructors had taught. 3 rd class rope meant climbing to the top using both the hands and legs, but in a very refined structured manner. It wasn’t just about reaching the top, but doing it in style without struggling.

“Good, join back,” he said to them as they came down.

He asked all of us to do the same one by one, and more or less all of us were now physically fit enough to reach the top.

“Save two of you, all the others will fail,” he said to us. I was amongst the other lot who had apparently not climbed the rope in a refined manner.

“I want you all to focus on doing it the right way, just reaching the top won’t do. Now look at how 2 nd class rope is done.”

Saying this he went towards the rope.

2 nd class rope was reaching the top using only hands (and not the legs). In fact, for passing the test, one’s body had to be straight like a board, with the legs far away from the rope. He gave a perfect demo of the 2 nd class rope, and came down looking satisfied with himself. These were 5 th term basic tests, so we didn’t have to worry about coming to that stage right now. We then went to the chest touch bars. These were huge planks of wood in a football goalpost form. For the Chest-Touch test, we had to pull ourselves up and touch our chest to the plank.

“Sergeant, how are the 1 st termers in chest touch?” a 6 th termer came and asked the Sergeant.

“They’ll clear the test sir,” he said.

“1 st termers, I want you to come up to this level of fitness as soon as possible,” saying this, he went towards the chest touch bar. Bang! Bang! Bang!

Every time he pulled himself up, he banged his chest to the wooden bar and the entire thing shook. The Sergeant was smiling, standing at a corner. We all looked at the 6 th termer in awe, and stopped counting. Bang! Bang! Bang!

“Anyone wants to try beating me,” he enquired, after coming down finally.

None of us had the guts or the capacity. Thankfully, it was time and everyone started moving back to the Squadron. It was now time for the move-in . Move-in was the formal gathering of everyone, before moving inside the Squadron after games. After some time-pass punishments, came the move-in pushups. After about zillions of pushups, the CSM said out loudly.

“On your knuckles everyone,” he shouted.

“Yeah, on your knuckles, let’s have ‘Foxtrot’ pushups,” said the SCC, coming from behind, and got into the push-up position.

Knuckle pushups were generally the final set of pushups (done by clenching the fists and with knuckles on the rock solid ground, full of stones and what not).

“Alright, we’ll have 20 ‘Foxtrot’ pushups,” the SCC roared, “are you ready?”

“Yes sir,” the Squadron shouted.

“1,” he said, and bent down for a pushup.

“Foxtrot,” we hollered, and did a pushup.

“2,” he shouted and this continued with everyone being their loudest in the end. This was a kind of energy instilling act, which kept up the morale of the Squadron.

Within a few months, the end of term came in and the DLTGH became 10. DLTGH stood for— “Days-Left-To-Go-Home” and almost everyone from the 1 st to 6 th termers used to start cutting these days, at least from DLTGH 45 onwards. One of the Squadrons in each of the Battalion was the Parents Squadron (for the Parents of 6 th termers). All of a sudden, there were curtains in the bathrooms, and a changed look and feel.

On one of the evenings before POP, all juniors were busy setting up the stage for the farewell party from the Squadron to 6 th termers.

“Imagine, we’ve finished the 1 st term,” I said to Sandeep, handing him a stool to pass ahead.

“Yeah, I still remember the day I came to the ground-floor-right-staircase-corner at 0300hrs in PT rig, to sleep under the staircase. You, Vikram and Malhotra were already there sleeping away to glory,” he said laughing away.

“Yeah, then you also came in with us and we huddled in a corner,”

I reminisced.

The tikkis used to come barging into our doors anytime in the morning and punish us JLT (Just-Like-That). As it is, latching cabin doors wasn’t our privilege yet.

“Yeah, finally the term is over,” he said gladly, “So you’re singing a song in today’s farewell?”

“Yup,” I said smiling away, “Shaan’s number—‘ Woh Pehli Baar .’ ”

“I like that song,” Sandeep said. “By the way, I have a lot of issues to settle with Tiwari sir; have been waiting for today—

Grudges day . I’m going to make him do cream rolls, star jumps, sprints, knee to chests and make him sweat like a pig.”

The Grudges day fell on the day of the 6 th termers’ farewell party. As per tradition, few hours before the party, 6 th termers used to come out wearing

combat dungaree. Any junior, who had any grudges against any of them, could take it out by making them do physical punishments. It was all in good spirit of course, a way to settle score and let bygones be bygones. We had a great grudges time that day, and a nice farewell party (in which I sang quite okay-type).

Well, the first term at NDA was finally over. Soon, it was DLTGH—

1. We had a great passing out parade for the 97 th course along with other end-of-term activities, and went off to our homes for the term break.

“Rolling, sleeping and breaking sweat we traversed through the 1<sup>st</sup> term,

N-D-A spelt else wise is to be in our D-N-A, was a thought reaffirmed.”

### Journey To The Pinnacle

Our 2<sup>nd</sup> term started with 103<sup>rd</sup> course coming in as 1<sup>st</sup> termers. We were now in a term, where we would still get punishments one way or the other, but still didn’t have the privilege of taking (punishing) 1<sup>st</sup> termers. Technically, we were not even born in the academy until Greenhorn camps this term

—first of the three outdoor training camps at NDA. The term started with the academics, games, punishments and the daily survive-this-day strategies.

In the first week, we had the first Weapons Training (WT) class and we were all in the WT area, in combat dresses. In one corner of the WT area, there was a board stating—“ Ek Goli, Ek Dushman ”

(one bullet, one enemy). This was the cornerstone for sharp shooting skills —“thou shalt shoot to kill.”

Well, it turned out that some of our course-mates came in late by 10 minutes.

“ Cadets, aap is academy mei masti karne aae ho—10 mins late?

Bhed-bakri ki tarah chalte hue ?” the weapons training instructor (below officer rank) shouted in Hindi (have you come to this academy for a party; walking leisurely like a herd of sheep).

He started going through the course report, while the entire course stood there in attention with each Squadron in one column.

“What’s the topic of today’s class?” Malhotra whispered to Garg, standing ahead of him.

“ Zameen se waqfiyat ,” Garg whispered back (introduction to the ground).

“Probably, we’ll be taught about various maneuvers taken while entering into enemy area,” I said with hope.

“Yeah, understanding how we can take advantage of hilly features,” Malhotra said. In two minutes, the main instructor was back at the podium.

“ Aapki aaj ki class hai—Zameen se waqfiyat ,” he said and looked sternly at the other instructors of every Squadron (today’s topic is “introduction to the ground”).

“ Saab, in sab ki zameen se waqfiyat karaiye aur bataiye yahaan late aane pe kya hota hai ,” he continued in a harsh tone (teach these guys a lesson on punctuality, and introduce them to the ground).

We spent most of the day in rolling on the ground, and probably covered the entire stretch from end-to-end by lunch. We heard from the instructors that the only way to know the ground and be comfortable with it is—if we get a feel of it. What a way to get a feel of it though.

After a well-earned lunch in muddy combat dress, we got ready for the games in the evening. This term I was going to play Hockey.

After a few practice matches, I offered to be the goalkeeper since I had done that before.

“Mishra gear up, let’s test your goalkeeping skills,” one of the 5 th termers said.

I got ready with the goalie gear, and started warming up for the shots.

“First things first,” he said, “are you afraid of the hockey stick?”

“No sir,” I said.

“Okay, stand straight,” he said and raised his hockey stick like a baseball bat. Bang!

The first hit came on the chest, then on the stomach, then a stronger one on the chest and then a couple of hits on the stomach.

“Does it hurt?” he asked, finally stopping.

“No sir,” I said firmly, it wasn’t hurting because of the padding, but I felt the impact.

“Good, don’t be afraid of the hockey stick or the ball, or any player,” he said, “nothing can hurt you. Yours is the ball, and yours is the Goal to save.”

“Gupta, Sharma, Mahesh, Bharat come here and start shooting goals from all angles,” he said calling more people in.

I did pretty well in the beginning—diving towards all angles.

However, within a couple of minutes, number of shooters increased and soon I was flying all around the goal post saving what I could. There were several strings or teams for every Squadron (with the first string being the best). I became the goalie for the second string for this term. Then started practice sessions every evening, with friendly inter Squadron matches as a build up to the competition.

The next Sunday, we went for the first timed cross-country practice run for the term. All the Squadrons in our Battalion had gathered for this timed practice run.

“Foxies, fall-in here,” the CSM announced, hopping about to warm himself up.

We all got together into a huddle, got a quick josh-talk (the Hindi word josh meant passion enthusing), and had some time to warm up before it began.

“It won’t be that tough to come in 1<sup>st</sup> / 2<sup>nd</sup> enclosure,” Shukla said while stretching his thighs.

“Yeah sure, easy for you to say,” I said. “I somehow managed 3<sup>rd</sup> enclosure last term; don’t know where I’ll land up in the actual cross-country.”

Cross-country was one of the most coveted competitions that had a huge prestige value. After the first guy reached the finishing point, the clock used to start ticking and every 2mins, the instructors closed an enclosure. The number of cadets in each of the enclosures decided the position of the entire Squadron.

“Just run 2mins faster and you’ll jump an enclosure,” Shukla chuckled. He was one of the best runners amongst us, and had no qualms about running the 14-15kms at a panther-speed.

“Yeah, that’s it?” Garje came in, “What about the rape hill?”

“That’s where we will be had ,” I said, as we all assembled at the starting point.

The Rape Hill , which was the actual name of the hill, was one of the steep vertical climbs that came up in the initial 3-4 minutes of the race. The starting point of the race was the Glider Dome—a huge stretch of land in the Air Force training area. From here was a long stretch, followed by a thin opening towards the base of the Rape Hill. The thin opening was a big bottleneck of the race, so it was important to be one of the firsts to cross that.

The Rape Hill was an almost vertical stretch where cadets ran or

in fact climbed up with full energy, overtaking where possible.

After that was a series of uphill and downward route across black roads, small hillocks, open ground and then finally ending up in the Bombay Stadium (which was our sports stadium). After the timed practice run, we came back to the Squadron and started running in circles, cooling down.

“Squadron move to your respective floors, and take out your rugs,” the CSM said to everyone.

“I’m totally fagged out, what are we going to do with the rug now, sit-ups?” I said to Bhalla knowingly, as we all rushed into the Squadron.

“Precisely,” Bhalla said winking at me, running up to his room.

“All of you lie down on your back,” the 6 th term appointment of our floor (Divisional Cadet Captain—DCC) said to everyone. We all lay down on the rugs and although I couldn’t see, I was sure that it looked like a long line of semi-dead bodies lying in parallel.

“We’ll do ‘nine inches up’—keep your legs straight and nine inches above the floor; don’t come down until I say so. We’ll do an initial count of 50. I will say ‘1’ you will say ‘2’. Are you ready?”

“Yes sir,” the entire floor shouted.

“Up, and 1” he said.

“2,” we said and the counting continued until 40, after which the speed came down.

“47”

“48,” we said.

“47,”

“48,” we shouted, trying to hold our legs up in the air somehow and this 47-48 went on.

“49,” he said finally and we finished with a 50. Such exercises went on, in preparation for the cross-country race over the weekends and other times. The best part was sixth termers stepping-up and walking over our stomachs. It gave a feeling of what we see in AXN and other channels with trucks going over a person’s stomach (okay, the similarity might be rather exaggerated).

On one of the days, the two pre-breakfast periods were of Drill.

Drill was the bedrock of discipline. Drill classes were one of those, which needed the maximum preparation in terms of turnout

(i.e. in terms of the way each part of our uniform looked). This was where there were highest chances of getting official punishments as well. After morning muster, I realized that my bike was punctured. I ran all the way to the Drill Square, making sure the dress remained topnotch. Drill Square was another name for the Khetrapal Parade ground.

“Hi Rehni,” I said to my course-mate from another Squadron, “you got late too?” I asked, taking out my rifle, while other cadets were busy getting the rifle numbers entered in the register and running to the Drill Square.

“Yeah, my boot anklets fell down on the way and I had to rush back,” there was an unmistakable haste in his voice.

“Ok, my bike gave up and...” I stopped mid-way as the drill instructors came in to rush us out.

Soon the entire course was there, standing in attention with their drill rifles. Five cadets were late, and were standing in one corner.

The SM or the Subedar Major (senior most rank possible, just below an officer rank) was the senior-most drill instructor in the academy. Just below him was the SA—Subedar Adjutant. The SM

was from Gorkha regiment and probably not more than 4' 5" in height. Nevertheless, his tiny northeastern eyes spoke of sheer insurmountable terror, and he commanded the fear that probably Hitler had in his times. The

SA, a tall Subedar, was more operationally involved with running the drill training for the academy. His name was Darpan Lal, popularly known as D-Lo by cadets, after the recently popularized name of the singer Jenifer Lopez, J-Lo .

The SA gave the final parade state report (headcount—present/absent) to the SM, while all drill instructors stood next to their Squadrons. The SM announced, “Drill Ustads break up.”

With that, all drill instructors stamped one-step forward, saluted and off began a sudden outburst of noises as the training began.

Ten minutes down the line, D-Lo came towards our Squadron.

“Cadets saavdhan ,” our Squadron drill instructor shouted at us, and we all came to attention.

“ Saab, inka drill accha nahi hai. Poora 102 course kaamchor hai, inko khub ragda do ,” he said (their drill movements are pathetic, entire 102 course is a shammer, roger them nicely).

Then moving towards one of us in the second file, he shouted, “

Ye tumhaari belt hai ki ghaagre ka naada ?”

Apparently, one of us had a loose belt. In fact, it was probably just fine but ideally, the belt was supposed to be as tight as physically possible.

“ Saab ,” D-Lo said to our Squadron instructor, grabbing the cadet from his belt from the front and shaking his entire body from the middle.

“ Poora ka poora Squadron, to Zero-point ,” he said angrily (send the entire Squadron to Zero-point). Saying that, he moved ahead to attack the next Squadron.

“ Zero-point poora course ,” our Squadron instructor screamed at all of us, and we sprinted towards this not-so-coveted place, with him following us.

The Zero-point was one place in the Drill square, no cadet can ever forget. There was a tank in one corner of the parade ground, which hosted the Zero-point show. At any given time, there were at least 20-30 cadets running around the Tank, or undergoing other punishments. The drill period finally got over with our uniform dripping with sweat, and we rushed for breakfast.

Over a period, there were many dialogues of our drill instructors, which stayed with us long after the classes got over. Some of these were creative while others were simply crazy.

Our Squadron drill instructor said to us one day, fuming with rage and each strand of his moustache standing out clearly—“

Tumhaari belt itni tight honi chaahiye, ki saans bhi mauka dekh ke andar jaane ki koshish kare .” That would translate creatively to—“your belt should be so tight, even the air you breathe should look for an opportunity to go inside.”

Then there was one during one of my Zero-point experiences—“

Poora Zero-point cadets, 10000 flat-foots carry on ,” he said, “

Pehla 5000 sahi toh baaki ke 5000 maaf .”

“Flat-foot” was essentially jumping on both the legs, making the knees touch the chest and landing on both feet—with a bang. What he had envisioned, was—entire Squadron to start off with 10000

flat-foots , if first 5000 are good, then he will let go off the remaining 5000. Sure!

Although the drill instructors were very strict and were always looking for a chance to catch cadets on the wrong foot, they did bring about a smile—especially on their command over English language.

This term we were going to have the first of the three outdoor training camps—Camp Greenhorn. We started our map reading practices early, and

one of the seniors took the responsibility for training us. The aim was to ensure that we bring in the

plaque for Greenhorn champs back to Foxtrot. On one of the night map-reading exercises, we reached the final reporting point strategically located at one point of the hill.

“You’ve just made it in time,” the senior said, “we’re done for the night. You can take a break. Go have a look at what’s there at the edge of the hill, and then we’ll go back.”

We all doubled up towards that direction.

“Whoa, what a stupendous sight,” I exclaimed, on reaching the edge.

“I wish we were carrying a camera,” Malhotra said.

It was the whole of Pune city—a playground of spectacular lights flying from one end to the other.

“What a sight man,” he said and continued with a smile, “which also makes you think that somewhere in the city, youngsters of our age would be partying in discs with their girlfriends this very instant.”

“Hmm,” somebody said.

There was a moment of silence while all of us looked into the flurry of lights, and considered that thought.

“Well we have a competition to win,” I said, as everyone started coming back to reality, “let’s go get that.” We all knew why we were there, how we had made it amongst many, and what we had willingly given up to become officers of the Indian Armed Forces.

## Survival Of The Fittest

The Inter Squadron Hockey competition started shortly and my string was doing pretty well. Today was one of the last 2 nd string matches; it was with Delta Squadron. The evening sky looked gloomy with chances of shower,

but we all hoped that nothing stops us from winning the game. The match started with lot of cheering, classy shots and a perfect game from both sides.

The cheering party—couple of juniors who weren't playing on that day, were busy chanting the cheers every now and then—“ Red and Yellow, Josh se khelo (chorus), Josh se khelo, Hosh se khelo (chorus) .”

Sixty minutes into the game, after a couple of penalty corners, and plenty of near misses from both sides, we were still going at 0-0. The ground was tense with forwards playing their heart out to score a goal, and others trying their best to do their part.

As a goalie, I was probably the most tensed in the last 10 minutes. One single miss from my side would have meant a total loss for us. In the last few minutes, the ball came over to our side and the Delta Daggers charged forward.

“Fall back, fall back,” I shouted to the backs, banged the head of my hockey stick to the ground twice, and got ready to save the goal.

“Mehra sir, cover no.6,” I said to Mehra sir, as the enemies attacked from the right flank. The shot came in, touched my left hand glove and went on to miss the right edge of the goal post, with a small gap. There wasn't a moment to lose and I gave a good hit to the ball, hoping our forwards would be able to convert a goal in the last three minutes. The game ended in a tie, and we moved on to the tiebreaker penalty strokes—five alternate strokes for both the teams.

“Mishra, this is it, don't be tensed,” the captain said, looking totally exhausted and wiped the sweat with his jersey while everyone cleared the ground, “five saves, that's what we need.”

“Yes sir,” I said bursting with confidence, “None of them will go in.”

Foxtrot went in first and we didn't score the first stroke. I prayed to God, and moved into the goal post. I stood tall like an insurmountable wall

protecting a fortress. I had practiced the penalty stroke innumerable times, took it to be my strength and this was the time to prove my mettle. I got on my toes, looked at my opponent through the helmet, straight into the eyes and gave my ready signal to the referee. As the referee blew the whistle, the ball came on to the extreme right and my stick saved the goal. There was a loud cheer, as we quickly changed sides with Delta coming in to defend our penalty stroke. The strokes started with 0-0 (Foxtrot-Delta), moved to 1-0 (we scored one yippee!), followed by the first miss from me leading to a 1-1, and then followed a no-goal from each keeping it at 1-1. The first four strokes were over, we were still at a tie, and everything now depended on the last stroke for each.

“Do the needful Mishra, all the best,” Tiwari, my course-mate said, adjusting my helmet.

“Yup, there’s no looking back,” I said, looking at our last penalty stroke taker, going in.

We converted our goal, and this was a big morale booster. The goal was now mine to save.

“Come on Mishra, you can do it,” some of the Foxy seniors said from a distance. I waved my hockey stick at them in acknowledgement.

I went back to the goal line, and witnessed the next few seconds in a slow motion. Everything moved slowly as I eliminated every person/object/noise from my conscious self. As I bent my knees in position, I could feel every part of my body. I could feel the small drop of sweat finding its way down the helmet; fingers in

the gloves getting a strong grasp at the hockey stick; toes on the feet getting ready to spring into action, and the eyes looking sternly at the opponent’s moves. The silence in the crowd was deafening, as my mind quickly ran through all the strategies.

“He’ll go left...no right...no wait he’ll go for a high center...,” my mind kept saying to me.

I looked at his feet movements, the hold on the stick, his eyes, and at the movements of his stick. No matter what you predict, or decided based on logical reasoning. In the end what matters is the final call taken by you as the goalie.

“Right...right...,” I was chanting and the referee blew the whistle.

In a millisecond, the game was over as I made a quick decision and jumped to the left. The ball hit my left hand glove, went up in the air and that’s it—we won. All Foxies came running in, and the ground was full of cadets in red and yellow vests, celebrating in jubilation. We cycled back to the Squadron with a sense of victory, and desire to do better in all the remaining matches.

The CSM gave three days of midterm mood to our string, and we all went inside the Squadron euphorically, for cold coffee and evening eats. After dinner, I came back to the Squadron and after some chatting with Singhania, went towards the staircase, thinking of how I was going to enjoy the 6 th term privileges.

“You hold it there,” someone shouted from the 1 st floor corridor, right as I stepped on to the 1 st floor, and turned over to go to the 2 nd floor.

I stepped down from the staircase, blissfully unaware of what had happened. It was a 4 th termer in punishment rig, who was probably standing in front of a 5 th termer’s room. He was now walking towards me, probably the 5 th termer had just left him, or so the disgust on his face said. Within the Squadron, as you went up the pecking order, the punishments changed from physical for juniors (1 st to 3 rd termers), to mental that had more to do with spoiling the free time (for seniors). Anyway, today was my day and I wasn’t going to let anyone spoil it.

“Mishra, how dare you see your pop in punishment rig?” he asked fuming with anger.

“I’m sorry sir; I didn’t see you at all. I was just going to the 2 nd floor,” I said meekly.

“Shut up and start rolling,” he said sternly. I stood still, and didn’t move.

“Mishra, I said sit down and start rolling,” he said, and flames were literally emanating from his eyes, ready to torch up any and every junior around.

“Sir, I...”

“Shut the fu\*\* up,” he shouted angrily, “don’t open your gob.”

I kept standing still, chest out-chin up-stomach in-shoulders squared.

“Sir, we won our match today, CSM gave us midterm mood,” I said in one go.

“Oh is it? I don’t care **ahole, get fuin** rolling,” he said petulantly, and came closer to me.

This was getting irritating. I knew my rights. I did not move.

“Mishra, you’re disobeying a direct order,” he said coming over to my right, and now making it an ego issue. The temperature in that end of the corridor was soaring up, and surprisingly no one was in sight.

“No sir, I do not recognize your order,” I said firmly, looking straight towards the end of the corridor. “The CSM has given me a well-deserved midterm mood , and it’s in contradiction to what you’re asking me to do.”

There was a pause while he tried to absorb what I had just said, and I wondered— “what a dialogue dude .”

“Mishra you’re gone now. I’m saying for the...”

“Tyagi,” said a voice with a strong tenor, and I saw a 6 th termer coming down from the staircase. We both turned towards him.

“Mishra, you played good today, well done!” he said in a straight tone, “report to him the morning your midterm mood gets over.”

“Yes sir,” I said, concealing my happiness at the closure to the situation that could have gone out of hand.

“Push-off Mishra,” the 6 th termer said (push-off was a toned down version of fu\*\* off).

“Tyagi,” I heard him say harshly to the 4 th termer, as I went supposedly out of hearing range. “Change into RRCO , and move in front of my cabin in the next 10mins.”

RRCO was another punishment rig for 4 th termers in which they had to wear the riding rig and back packs. I felt much better now. I then went to my nearest course-mate’s cabin—Namgay Yeshi, the bhuti (from Bhutan) cadet, and narrated the story to him.

“That was quite an experience, straight out of a movie,” he said,

“here, try this yak cheese.”

“Yeah, now that I think of it, there was a similar dialogue exchange in —‘Crimson Tide,’ ” I said, eating the yak cheese (this was supposedly the favorite diet supplement of all Bhutanese).

“Denzel Washington and Gene Hackman were really good, it’s one of my favorite movies,” Yeshi said.

“Yeah mine too, although that was more about breakup of nuclear launch protocol aboard a submarine,” I winked at Yeshi, “the similarity is close though.”

“Sure it is—very close, so you’ll report to him?”

“Yeah, I’ll go to him on Friday morning and finish it off, before he calls the entire course for it,” I said stepping out of his room. “But next few days, I’m going to ENJOY.”

“Yeah, Tyagi sir is DWL (Disgusted-With-Life) as it is, don’t let him bother you,” Yeshi said, bidding good night.

Starting Friday, I reported to Tyagi sir early in the morning for a couple of days, after which he finally moved on. He never accepted though, that he was the one at fault.

Few weeks later, the D-day for the final cross-country came up.

The Glider dome was full of cadets from all the Squadrons, some jumping and loosening up, while most of the others taking a final leak before the run (a must before the race). Ten minutes before the start, almost all the Squadrons got into a huddle for the final josh-talk .

“Guys, today’s the day,” the SCC said, “all the early morning runs, the strengthening exercises, the Squadron spirit, it all gets down to your performance today.”

“When you look at any other Squadron guy, think ‘Foxtrot’ and cross him,” he continued. “If you see another red and yellow, buck him up and take him along.”

“So,” he said looking at others going towards the starting point, and raised his voice, “how’s the josh ?”

“High sir,” we all shouted at high decibels.

“Let’s go and get the trophy,” he said and we all doubled up to the starting point.

The Commandant of the Academy shot the gun in the air, and announced the coveted word— Go . The entire academy sprinted ahead like a herd of panthers zooming across the African

grasslands. The only difference was—this was a set of ~1800 wild cats jetting forward with half of them overtaking another every five seconds. I ran my heart out as fast as I could. After reaching the bottleneck, the speed came down because of the number of people trying to pass through the nozzle of nature. The Rape hill was where I crossed many cadets. It took a lot of effort but I promised myself a two-second break after reaching the

top. The moment I reached the top, a couple of cadets whom I had overtaken, shot forward and I realized that there wasn't a moment to spare.

The race went on and every time a cadet crossed me, I ran harder.

Most of the times I crossed that cadet, but other times he was probably just better. In the end, all of us were running for our Squadrons. By the time I reached the last turning before which the gate of the stadium was visible, I was exhausted. There wasn't an iota of energy in the body. Finally, the point of the last-josh —the last 100metres came up. I could see enclosures made out of white bands, surrounded by various instructors, officers and ex-NDA officers cheering cadets.

All that I focused on now, was the opening to some enclosure (didn't know which one). The stadium was full of people, many cadets had already reached, and several others were behind me.

All the energy in my body was now concentrated and focused only on the legs and hands.

“Faster, run faster, the enclosure is closing,” someone shouted from the crowd.

I reached my enclosure and collapsed; within 20-30 seconds, the enclosure closed. I was still panting heavily, and remained on the ground for about a minute. There was loud noise all around as people were cheering those coming in. I looked to my left and saw a cadet from Mike sitting down.

“Excuse me sir, which enclosure is this?” I asked. It was obviously always safer to assume that the other guy is a senior, then regretting later.

“This is the 3 rd enclosure,” he said looking at me with tired eyes, and then at other cadets coming in. Suddenly he got up and started shouting and cheering for someone.

I got up to see what caused this reaction. There was a cadet from Mike, running as fast as he could, with another Mike cadet on his shoulder. Other onlookers started clapping hard. It turned out that the cadet on the shoulder

fell down right at the gate, and was badly injured. The other one, who was apparently his two terms senior, went out of his way

to get him to the end. This Squadron spirit—the willingness to be completely selfless for your comrade, made each one of us proud of our training. Our Squadron came 3 rd this time, which was

definitely an improvement (from last time), if not the ultimate victory. After the mini celebration, we had the entire day to ourselves and enjoyed it as much as we could.

Soon it was time for Greenhorn camps. We left for the camp in huge Army trucks, along with weapons and all the camping equipment to one of the hills in faraway land. Once the entire course was in, the tent pitching started with a competition. In a matter of time, we had perfect tents lined up for the entire course, with snake trenches dug up around all the tents.

“Guys,” Shukla said, coming in with a chit of paper at night,

“this is today’s password— ‘ Zindagi- Toofan .’ Officers will be coming through the nights for random checks.”

“What a dumb combination is that,” exclaimed Vishal.

“Yeah it’s not your choice,” Shukla shrugged the comment away with a yawn, “don’t fu\*\* it up guys.”

“By the way, we’ve all agreed upon the course name, right? No difference of opinion I hope,” I asked generally.

“Yeah, I’m fine with it, although I would still prefer 102

Fascinates,” Verma said.

Every course chose their course name, at the end of the 2 nd term camps. We had already discussed on a couple of names in the last few weeks.

“That’s been used earlier,” I said. “So we all agree—we will be 102 Formidables.”

“Yeah, let’s stick to it,” Shukla said, keeping the page with the duty roster in a corner.

“102 Formidables, yippee!” someone said out, in a subdued shout.

I checked the duty roster prepared by Shukla for my slot, and pushed off to sleep. At 0158hrs at night/early morning, while enjoying the soothing sun in the garden on a cold winter morning (in my dream of course), someone shook me vigorously into consciousness.

“Mishra, get up it’s your turn,” somebody said in the darkness, he then went on to wake up Verma. We got up and stood guard, ready for any officer who comes for a random check.

“Zindagi-Toofan, right?” I confirmed with Verma.

“Yeah, and these 2hrs would probably be the toughest to stay awake,” Verma said, our slot was 0100hrs to 0300hrs.

“Yeah, keep your eyes and ears open.”

“Mishra, look there,” Verma pointed towards one of the tents in the long row of tents on my left side.

“Fu\*\*, I think that’s the whole Squadron rolling around the tents,” I exclaimed, trying to remember which Squadron’s tent was the eighth one from ours.

“Probably they messed up the ‘Zindagi-Toofan’ combo,” Verma said, getting his rifle and standing up to see if there was any officer trying to spy on us.

“Or probably the sentries were too sleepy to bother the intruder with a password,” I chuckled, while we waited for the clock to strike three. Twenty minutes passed by and there was no sign of intrusion.

“Thum, kaun aata hai—dost ya dushman,” Verma exclaimed at a low voice to me, trying to kill time (halt! who goes there, friend or foe).

“Dost,” I said whispering back, following the drill, indicating that I am a friend.

“Zindagi,” he whispered, expecting me to complete the drill on passwords with— Toofan .

“... kaisi hai paheli haaye, kabhi yeh hasaaye, kabhi yeh rulaaye ...” I whispered a song instead (a famous old Hindi song) with a wide grin.

“Mishra, just because you can sing,” he said, giving a friendly bang on my helmet at my banter, “doesn’t mean that you won’t get killed.”

“Oh, I’m just teeny-weeny bit creative at times,” I said, standing up to stretch my legs.

“You’re creative? Huh,” Verma exclaimed, “I’ll show you creativity. Here’s a line I just thought of adding on to NDA’s famous sayings—

“Hitler died, Napolean died, I too am not feeling very well lately,

All 1 st termers sprint down to CSM’s cabin immediately, immediately, immediately .”

“God save my ears from any more lines, on these lines,” I said, bowing in front of him in wonderment. Rest of the minutes passed by, and it was time to wake up the next pair.

From morning, the camp routine started again. For these few days, we were totally in the hands of our Squadron Commander— Squady

and the three Divisional officers— Div-Os . There were various classes on how to interpret the contour lines on the map, indication of landmarks, various maneuvers, and plenty of punishments—whenever officers got the opportunity.

Soon it was the evening of the last day and at night was the Josh run —the run back to the academy. All Squadrons were divided into two routes—Red and Blue. Both the groups had to compete on these two routes, which took a

different path and met at the PT fields back at NDA. I was part of the red group and we were set to go in some time.

“Guys, we leave at 2145hrs,” Singhania said, coming in with our 24hrs emergency ration.

In addition to the items that we were carrying individually—

backpack set (with blanket, shovel, mosquito net, rain cape, etc.) and rifle, each group had to carry a stretcher and an unusually heavy LMG (Light Machine Gun). We were all to navigate through various checkpoints using our map and compass (GPS

handheld devices were in use by the Army, but we were learning everything ground up).

At 2145hrs, we started. We shouted Foxtrot and ran away looking for the first checkpoint.

After a couple of checkpoints and hours of running up and down the grueling terrain, we were all exhausted. What kept us going was the fact that any minute that we stop to rest, we'll lose out in the competition. Every moment that we stopped for the map reader to verify the bearings, was utilized fully (in resting)—

even if that was only for 45 seconds. It was now my turn for carrying the LMG. I became a humongous piece of art—wearing a helmet, LMG on the shoulders, backpack with a shovel (for digging), ammunition pouches hanging in front, and the water bottle just below the backpack (bouncing off on my behind, at every step).

By now, we were running in auto mode (body weight just following the non-stop running legs). After running on a rather steeply inclined route for some time, our map-readers—Chaddha and Garje stopped abruptly.

“Guys hold on, I think there's a shorter route,” Garje said to us.

I sat down with others and looked down at the point from where we had started the climb, and wondered in horror if we were in a wrong hill altogether. It was around 0330hrs, and the moon was probably on its way back home now. Everyone other than the map-reader took the opportunity to drop dead on the ground.

“What happened?” I enquired looking over at the map, keeping my LMG to a side.

“Nothing big, I think we can reach that temple if we skirt across this feature and then go up here,” Garje said, pointing at the contour lines on the map that indicated our proposed path.

“Not losing height is good,” I said and got up to move, pushing others to get up too.

It was a basic concept—while trekking across hills for going from point A to B, it was better to skirt across the sides of the hill rather than going up (to the top) and then down; hence saving on energy and time.

“Guys, look at that,” I said pointing towards a flurry of lights in one single file, at the bottom of one of the adjacent hills.

It was some other Squadron, probably on the same route as ours.

We got hold of everything and sprinted forward, following our map-readers. In five minutes, we came to a rather steep climb.

“Chaddha, are you sure this is the route?” someone shouted from the rear.

“Yeah, let me just reach the top,” he said, “you guys just hold on for a minute.”

He went ahead, crossed the crevice on top of the hill, and then suddenly looked spellbound.

“Guys come fast.”

We all went ahead. His voice definitely carried a positive note.

As we came nearer to the parting between the two small features, the crevice suddenly gave way to a clearing.

“That’s beautiful,” I said, “which also means that we’re on the right track.”

We could see the land far away, and the sparkling lights of buildings, still glowing in the wee hours. It was as if nature had pulled off the curtain to show its masterpiece oil painting materialized.

“Guys, the temple is this side,” Garje said, starting to run without wasting a second and we all followed. We soon realized that our Red route was doing pretty well, which boosted our energy to heightened levels.

At 0515hrs, we reported at the PT fields. Our red route had come 2<sup>nd</sup>. To our delight, our blue route had come 2<sup>nd</sup> too. We lost on a few points because of some missing items in the contents of our backpacks. However, soon the overall results came out; our happiness knew no boundaries. We had come 2<sup>nd</sup> in Greenhorn camps, and it felt great (even though there was a slight resentment at not coming 1<sup>st</sup>).

The news reached Squadron even before we reached our home and we received a hero’s welcome, followed by josh -type knuckle pushups. The Foxtrot Squadron spirit had already taken deep roots, and we were more than happy to have brought glory to our Squadron.

“Second termers, you’ve done us proud,” the CSM said with a pleasing smile, “Go and relax now 102 Formidables, you deserve it.”

I came back to my room and looked at the mirror. The figure I saw was that of a tired fellow, muddy overalls, blackened skin, a totally camouflaged face, but an expression of pure ecstasy. My body was hurting at places I never knew existed. Also, apparently this was easiest of the three camps in all, next being Camp Rovers in 4<sup>th</sup> term and Camp Torna in 6<sup>th</sup> term. In the evening, we had the campfire with a small impromptu entertainment show, and lots to eat. The biggest highlight of the night was the Tipsy Pudding —a rich creamy ambrosial sweet dish that was probably the best pudding in the world.

During one of the riding classes in the following days, I had a one-big-fall and broke my thumb. I spent the next few days in the Military Hospital (MH), which was heaven on earth for junior term cadets. I also got to see a couple of “FRIENDS” episodes on TV, which was currently running in Season 6. I came back somewhere around DLTGH-33days, and the end-of-term passed away smoothly with the passing out of the 98 th course. Soon, I was home.

“Look at my child, what have they done to you,” my naani ji (maternal grandmother) said, showering all the love and affection, and handing over a plateful of delicious goodies to eat. “Don’t they give you anything to eat in that place?”

“Of course they do naani ji ,” I said with a smile, “but it all gets absorbed in a few hours.”

“One year is over. Another two years to go in NDA and then one year in IMA,” Mom said to naani ji reassuringly, “he will soon come out as a smart Army officer.”

“Bhaiya show us the photos of NDA,” my cousin brother said, “and then show us the handstand.”

“Yeah, all in good time,” I said seeing other cousins coming down, “it’s so nice to be home.”

Throughout the term-break, I hogged a lot, slept a lot, watched a lot of TV, had fun fights with Vanshika, and met my old classmates from school. This time I had also bought a body hugging T-shirt from the Gole market in NDA. It had a statement to make—“I Live by chance, I Love by Choice, I Kill by

Profession” and had a dagger running through it from between; so much for modesty.

Time moves faster than the speed of light during vacation and soon enough, I was back at NDA.

## The Toughest Times

The 3 rd term started with a feeling of *déjà vu*, the only difference being that we were 3 rd termers now. On the first day itself, the night started with the first session of all tikkis .

In this term we were going to have the privilege to punish juniors (1 st , 2 nd termers), but more importantly we were going to be punished for anything and everything that goes wrong in the Squadron. I barely got time to speak to my under-study on the first day, a guy called Dilip Kumar. The 2 nd day, a fifth termer banged at my door early in the morning.

“Mishra, you’re the over-study of Dilip Kumar?” he asked, looking very irritated.

“Yes sir,” I said, getting up from my bed immediately.

“Start rolling,” he said and moved away from the door to indicate that he really meant it.

“What did he do sir?” I asked, half knowing that there will be no response and this was just the beginning of a long session. On stepping outside I saw that most of my course-mates were there, so obviously it wasn’t for any particular reason—“general happiness”, as someone had rightly said. This is how the 3 rd term started.

The days ahead were full of physical rigor, training, lot of punishments and lot of fun (in its own way). One of the Sundays, I was sitting in the Gole market in one of the shops with a place-type ikki pal—Saurabh.

“Mishra sir, sometimes I feel I won’t be able to last three years here,” Saurabh said, gulping a bottle of Pepsi and looking rather worried.

“Saurabh the first thing that should come to your mind, whenever this feeling jolts in is this—so many people have done it, so can YOU,” I said reassuringly.

“That’s true,” he said with a pensive look.

“It’s all in the mind and there’s no limit to human endurance—this we learnt in the 2<sup>nd</sup> term camps. If you think that nothing can hurt you, then nothing really can. Of course, that is—  
theoretically speaking.”

“Yes of course,” he said smiling along, probably making a mental note.

“Within the boundaries of ethics, when you need to be a smart-ass, do whatever you want, don’t get caught,” I winked. “So when you’re bunking a punishment report, enjoy that moment and sleep peacefully,” I said getting up, “that moment is yours to savor.”

“If and when you get caught,” I continued as I paid the bill, “be man enough to own up, and face the consequences gladly.”

“That I’ve seen and will remember,” Saurabh said slyly.

“Yeah, the world here is full of rules and most of them need to be followed. Some can be bent,” I said, and continued with a smile, “and others can be broken.”

“That was a good one, any other one liner?”

“Another one,” I continued, “never stand when you can sit, never sit when you can lie down, and never stay awake when you can sleep. This is the energy optimization theory of NDA.”

“That was awesome sir!”

“Most importantly, not a statement but a fact,” I said with a serious note, “your course-mates are everything. You won’t realize it now, but you’ll always remember the moments spent with them during these three years.”

We got a squad and started marching back to the Squadrons. On reaching the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion area, the squad broke off and he proceeded towards his Oscar Squadron.

At night, after lights-out, I took out my diary. I had started jotting down few points at the end of every day, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> term. I just went over to one random day of the last term. There were only a few lines scribbled in a bad writing—

“ March 14<sup>th</sup> , had a really bad day. That Malhotra sir is one big a\*\*hole, spoilt my life after dinner. However, morning classes were good, had tea and snacks in social science block with Nikhil sir, got to have lunch after a thousand pushups and knee-to-chest in front of the Mess, wrote letter to Mom and Vanshika during study period, and didn’t get caught. Hope someone sorts out these tikkis this Sunday. Overall, it was an okay-type day. Good night papa, mom, sis .”

I went on to a list I had prepared from some of the graffiti previous courses had scribbled on our tables in the LHS (Lecture Halls), in the Sudan Block. There were some one liners like—

“Life is a journey, NDA is an accident”, and “I Came...I Saw....I Slept.” Then there was an alteration to the famous line—“If death comes to me before I prove my blood, (I) swear I will kill death.” Our modified version said—“If death comes to me before I have my breakfast, (I) swear I’ll pack my breakfast.”

Another one was—“More you Sleep in Peace, Less you Yawn in War,”

to the original one—“More you Sweat in Peace, Less you Bleed in War.” In Nagaland, there is an inscription on the cemetery of World War II soldiers. We all took pride in that line—“When you go home, tell them of us and say, for their tomorrow, we gave our today.” The heartrending note had its own modified version in NDA

—“When you go home, tell them of us and say, for their tomorrow, we went around the poles today” (reference to go-around-the-poles punishment by Sergeants).

The end of term was close approaching. I was going to be a 4<sup>th</sup> termer after one month. One of the Sundays I had made full plans for the liberty. One of my 6<sup>th</sup> term place-type pals from Charlie Squadron had entrusted me with

the task to find a ball partner for him. He was too shy. Although, it's not that I was any good in talking to girls anyway. My pen picture of school days would have read as—smart boy, intelligent, sporty, not talkative and shy of girls. However, I knew that Bhalla (my Foxy course-mate) would help on this front and I'll probably pick up this skill too.

Early morning I had a punishment report to a DWL 5 th termer (Disgusted-With-Life), in penta-pack-double-PT-rig at 0400hrs.

Double PT rig entailed wearing two OG jerseys, two shorts, two socks and so on (not two shoes thankfully). Penta-pack comprised of five full-blown packs with all contents—mosquito net, blanket etc. in each pack, tied to each other in one straight line.

Wearing and taking it off, was an ordeal in itself. I had prepared the penta-pack at night itself, and went off to wake up Tiwari.

“Hey Tiwari, get up,” I said pushing inside his cabin at 0345hrs.

Privilege to latch one’s cabin from inside was still a few weeks away.

“Mishra,” Tiwari said rubbing his eyes, “you have a report now?”

“Yeah, not lucky like you,” I said, “penta-pack-double-PT-rig to that Rihag character.”

“Oh okay,” Tiwari said, “you need help in wearing the packs?”

“Yup I need that, and also take this camera,” I said, handing him my camera.

“Oh thanks a lot,” he chuckled, taking the camera and putting it away, “I was thinking of buying one for myself.”

“Very funny, take my photo with the penta pack,” I said, moving towards the penta pack. It was still dark outside, and I hoped the photo comes out good when it's developed. At 0400hrs, I knocked at the door.

“Excuse me sir, Cdt. Siddhant Mishra reporting,” I said, and there was no response.

“Excuse me sir,” I said again, knocking harder.

“Yeah, is that Mishra?”

“Yes sir!”

“Are you wearing penta pack?” he asked from inside the closed door itself. I got a feeling that he’s not even going to get up from his bed. I will have to stand there for hours.

“Yes sir, double PT rig and penta pack,” I said. My back was already bending with the weight. It was as if somebody was pulling me down from behind.

“Push off Mishra,” he said, after one minute of silence.

“Right sir,” I said hiding the excitement in my voice, and moved away before he changed his mind. Probably he felt too guilty of asking good-hearted people (like me), to report, or maybe he was just too sleepy. Well, it was probably the latter. I came back to my cabin and pushed off to sleep, putting an alarm for 0630hrs.

At around 0900hrs we got our Liberty Cards signed, and I left for Pune city with Bhalla.

“She’ll be here by 1200hrs,” Bhalla said coming out of a telephone booth.

“And she’s coming with her friends, right?” I asked Bhalla with high hopes. He had just spoken to one of his old classmates, studying in FC—one of the most happening colleges in Pune.

“Yeah she’s coming with two of her friends,” Bhalla said. “She’s an old friend of mine, but I’m looking forward to meet her friends too.”

“Yeah well, I understand,” I winked at him, and we started walking across MG road. One could see NDA cadets with zero cuts wearing white shirt,

black trouser and NDA tie, out on liberty on Sundays, mostly in MG Road, FC Road and Deccan Gymkhana areas.

“Bhalla, 10’o clock outside the bakery door,” I exclaimed,

“there’s one hot chick in red from top to bottom.”

“Hmm...” Bhalla said in admiration, “your observation skills are improving my dear Watson.”

We went into the bakery, and saw two 6 th termers waiting on the counter. They were probably waiting for prospective ball partners to come, because one of them was carrying a single red rose. 6 th termers had the privilege of wearing tie pins, and that made them stand out from the rest of us.

“6’o clock Mishra, turn around,” Bhalla said, “two gals approaching us.”

I turned around 180 degrees. Two beautiful girls were indeed approaching us and I wondered if they’re looking at someone else behind us. The two damsels were now closer, and I tried not looking directly at them.

“Hi, we need your help,” the girl wearing a pink top and low waist jeans said.

“Yes of course,” Bhalla said, offering his chivalry with the best set of smiles that he had ever thrown on anyone.

“Thanks, I’m Monika and this is Tia,” she said, indicating towards the beauty standing next to her.

“Hi Monika, Tia, I’m Siddhant and this is my course-mate Aditya,”

I said and couldn’t believe that the gorgeous face was actually talking to me (okay fine, us ). All of a sudden, a confidence erupted from inside that told me that I can talk to girls easily.

“Guys we’re studying in FC, and our senior wants to pass on this message to one 5 th termer in NDA,” Monika said, handing a sealed envelope.

“Oh okay,” Bhalla said, taking the envelope, saw the name and passed it to me with a wicked smile, “we’ll definitely pass it on.”

I saw the name, it was for a Sergeant of Mike Squadron, whom we hated.

“Yes we will, we know him,” I said, smiling my best smile ever.

“Thanks a lot, are you guys busy right now?”

I thought—“ Whoa! We are as busy as a hippo enjoying a day long siesta,” and asked Bhalla, “you need to meet your friends at 12 right?”

“Yeah, but there’s always time for a coffee,” he said, not letting go of the opportunity, “and it’s only 11.30.”

“Great, I want to ask so many questions,” Tia said.

We climbed up to the first floor, and found a place to sit by the window. Suddenly the weather seemed to be pleasant and gratifying. We ordered for a cup of coffee, and got talking. At around 1145hrs, it was time for Bhalla to meet his friends.

“Guess I’ll see you at the bus stop later,” Bhalla said to me, and bid them farewell.

For a second, I felt awkward; sitting with two of the cutest girls, I had ever spoken to till date.

“So how’s life in FC,” I asked, looking first at Monika and then at Tia (had to pay due attention to both).

“Oh our life is not as exciting as yours,” Monika said, “This message was from one of our seniors. It seems her boyfriend is in the hospital with a plaster.”

“But I don’t like her much,” Tia shrugged away suddenly, with frowned eyebrows.

“Why’s that Tia, is she dominating?” I asked, showing full interest and commitment.

I realized that asking a relevant question to a girl is like opening the gates of a dam. Once the flow starts, it’s difficult to stop it. I had not even spoken about NDA until now and only been listening to their aphrodisiacal voice.

“You know Siddhant, the other day we had a dancing class and...,”

Monika said pursing her lips, and pushing the flick of hair away from her eyes.

She went on to narrate an interesting incident full of expressions and exclamation marks. I was loving this moment, with my eye gaze spanning across her beautiful eyes, the triangular matching pink ear rings, and the flick of hair that kept coming back.

“So, why don’t you tell us about your experience in NDA,” Monika said, after one round of hot cappuccino and one round of brownies in two hours.

“Oh well, we don’t do much,” I said with an innocent smile and started with an impressive set of stories (which were more or less true). The twinkle in their eyes at some points was awesome.

My confidence level surprised me, probably came from having gone through a lot worse.

“I’ve heard that you guys can run non-stop for three days and nights,” Tia chipped in, sipping her cold coffee now.

“Yeah well,” I said, hiding my astonishment at those statistics (thinking aloud—“ really?” ), and continued, “we believe—there’s no limit to human endurance, everything is mental; so you know...”

It was actually true. There’s no limit to human endurance and it’s all in the mind. Her statement was of course an exaggeration, but who cares. Soon it was time for me to leave. I remembered my task, and thought of taking their numbers in case Bhalla doesn’t get one.

“Will you two like to come to our ball,” I asked.

“We so want to, but have our exams around that time,” Monika said, “but my friends—seniors want to. Can you note my number?”

“Yes of course,” I said gladly, “your hostel phone number?”

“Yeah, you can just ask for any of us, we’ll be there in 2-3 minutes.”

I noted the number, and just then a couple of their classmates (all girls), came in. After a quick round of introduction I slipped out, it was time to leave now.

“Hey Bhalla, did you get any number,” I asked, reaching the bus stop just in time.

“Yes I did, and my goodness what luck you had,” Bhalla beguiled, looking at me with jealousy.

“Yeah seriously, I even got their number,” I said, feeling very proud.

“And to think that you thought, you’re no good with girls,”

Bhalla said, hopping into the bus as it came in. “We’ve also got the route to a treat from that Sergeant.”

“Oh yes, the sealed envelope smelling of flowers,” I said, remembering the distinct smell.

There was no seat in the bus. We went standing, and true to the spirit of NDA, we did not waste a moment staying awake.

Throughout the one-plus hour journey, the bus must have stopped a number of times, but the ability to sleep—standing, marching or running, was deeply ingrained by now.

I had restrictions on the next two Sundays (an official punishment that fu\*\*ed up an entire Sunday), and somewhere down the line, lost that phone number. That Sergeant admitted in the Military Hospital-MH with a plastered leg thanked us for passing on the letter from his girlfriend, and we knew that just for that, he would never bother us again.

After a few months, it was finally DLTGH-0 and tonight was the last night. After the passing out parade of the 99 th course in the morning tomorrow, I was going to catch the afternoon NDA bus to the railway station. I used my small mirror to look at the mark that 3 rd term had left on us—literally speaking. It was a small healed-up mark on my back, just above the hips; made by the backbone and caused by the innumerable rolls that we had taken by now. It felt great, to have “passed-out” from the 3 rd term. It was lights-out soon and I took out my torch to make the entry in my diary.

“ Hi Diary...today was the last day in the Squadron as a junior...

feels great...leaving for home after the POP...Mom and Vanshika I'm coming home, yippee...Good night papa, mom, sis .”

### Privilleges

The 4 th term started with a feeling of seniority sinking in.

Other than more focus on the service training from this term (Army/AF/Navy), we now had more privileges inside the Squadron.

Also, we were now authorized to have some level of ego. While speaking to a 5 th /6 th termer, we could be at stand-at-ease position with hands folded behind, unless of course it was a punishment report. At the same time, outside the Squadron (during classes, etc.), life was going to be tougher with 5 th term Sergeants after our lives—24 x 7.

Our classes started, and during the initial period when the academy is hot (with appointments being the strictest possible), it was literally in flames. Every day lunch had become a mission per se , with Sergeants and other appointments taking post around each of the three entry doors of the Mess. Now was when we were totally in awe, of the inventor of Iron and Maggi .

Maggi cooked in a steel mess tin, by keeping over an iron (clothes pressing iron), was our staple diet (no cooking as such was allowed in the room).

This term we had many service classes and our Officers taught us military tactics and stuff like that. We learnt the nitty-gritty of attack, support fire, cordon, raid, ambush, flank positions, and all the works. Some of the officers made rather funny claims during the classes though—

“Back in my NDA days, I was 1 st in cross-country race in all my six terms. You came in the 3 rd enclosure? Did you go for a movie in between?”

“When you were in liquid form, I was in uniform, eh!”

“Cadets, in our times, 9 feet ditch was 15 feet, and we jumped across with our weapons, as if we were walking.”

“In my days, I was blue in PT, Gold Torchy all six terms, 1 st enclosure, academy team hockey and basketball. So, what have YOU done till now?”

These classes were a mixed bag of training and punishments (and fun at times). There was always of course that one person who wanted to eat an extra slice of bread, which got him late for the class, making the course-report late and which gave another reason for punishments.

One of the days, after the study period, the Squadron gathered in the Anteroom for daily order fall-in (for listening to orders from the Battalion office and Adjutant’s office). The BRO/ARO

(Battalion/Academy Routine Orders) was generally a one pager with key orders for the day (including official punishments for cadets of the Squadron). The footer of the page said—“ Ignorance of orders is no excuse .” The CSM started with the orders.

“5 th term Air Force cadets, your visit has been moved forward by one week,” the CSM said, with a pause waiting for the familiar exclamation of approval.

“Yah-Yah!” the 5 th termers said in unison.

“There have been some issues with four shops in the Gole market, and Gole is out-of-bound till further orders,” he said.

“No, No!” 5 th and 6 th termers said in disappointment.

All 2 nd , 3 rd , 4 th termers maybe said “sh\*t” in their minds sadly, hoping that things are fine by Sunday. 1 st termers didn’t have the privilege to think as it is (hah hah!).

“4 th termers, you will have your ‘Camp Rovers’ briefing on Monday...” the CSM went on with other routine orders, and then smiled suddenly.

“That’s interesting,” the CSM said looking up from the orders,

“who’s in Section 104 C?”

Two dukkis looked at each other.

“Sihag and Sharma get up,” the 3 rd termers said promptly. The promptness and good reactions of juniors was the responsibility of 3 rd termers, and they ensured it always. Both of them stood up, and had a worried expression on their face.

“Whole of Section 104 C has been awarded one ET punishment for,”

the CSM said, looking at his course-mates and grinning from side to side, “Giving meaningful looks to Instructor.”

“Yah-Yah!” everyone shouted.

“ Dukkis , come on, improve your taste man,” another 6 th termer said.

“Jokes apart, stay out of pointless punishments, all of you,” the CSM said, and continued with other announcements. These charges were always terse —to the point, but at times worded in a funny way. One of the other charges we came across was—“sleeping mercilessly in classes.

In a few weeks, it was time for Camp Rovers, our 4 th term camp.

Camp Rovers is the toughest camp in the world, for this age group. We all reached the campsite in Army Trucks, and obviously,

slept through the entire journey. Our truck stopped abruptly, and I looked outside.

“Look at that truck,” Verma said, “all the guys have their heads & helmets down with legs up on the seat—sleeping away to glory.”

“Yeah,” I said looking around at the similar sight in our own truck, and adjusting my helmet, “I had a great nap too.”

“Garg get up,” I said annoyingly, banging on his helmet, “your stupid rifle kept hitting on my head throughout the journey”

“Oh, are we there yet?” Garg said, picking up his gear suddenly, as if he was never asleep.

“Yeah,” I said, stepping down, and had a look at our campsite.

The site was on a flat piece of land, surrounded by hills on almost all sides. It was probably a good place for a picnic with friends.

The camp activities started with bivouac pitching, some punishments, and a flurry of exercises. We had training exercises by day and other navigational exercises at night. Towards the end of the camp, we were exhausted after digging through the nights in rain, running navigational exercises from point-to-point, punishments for one reason or the other, and classes where some of us couldn’t help but doze off. Finally, it was the night for “The Great Escape” competition. We had been broken up into groups, and the vehicles dropped us at random places, far away from the campsite.

“Ok, so the idea is that we need to find our way, and run back to the base camp—without getting caught, right?” I reaffirmed with others in my group, as the instructors left the place, leaving us on our own.

We were all ready for the operation in combat dungarees, with our faces and hands smeared with camouflage, and the moonlit night charging up the atmosphere.

“Yes, Officers will be laying ambush en route , and we cannot use the road,” Shukla said, “patrolling vehicles will keep moving, and we shouldn’t get caught.”

“This’ll be exciting,” I said, “we’re literally behind enemy lines and need to reach our so called ‘friendly location’ safely and fast.”

The aim was to reach the base camp using smart survival instincts. We started running towards the general direction, running through bushes and crossing over the road at times. It was somewhere around midnight, when we came into a wide opening towards the road.

“Guys, let’s run along the road for some time,” I whispered.

“It’s risky, but let’s do that,” Sanjay said, “you guys wait here, I’ll go forward and see if there’s anyone.” The night was dark, with a stream of light coming out from a clouded moon.

There was absolute silence. Sanjay tiptoed forward, while we waited near a long stretch of thick bushes. The ground was somewhat damp, so fortunately he didn’t make any noise while walking. But suddenly, a loud voice erupted out of nowhere.

“Hold it that group,” an officer’s voice came up, “the enemy has caught you.”

Sanjay ducked down on the ground, and our hearts froze—probably missed a beat or two. Suddenly, we saw a few dark figures coming out of the bushes on the other side of the road. Apparently, it was another group caught in an ambush laid by the officers. That group started rolling, as the officers kept lecturing about how foolish they were, and what would have happened if militants ever caught them in an ambush.

“Sanjay, fall back,” I whispered.

We quietly walked back, and thought of hitting the road after about 1km run through the bushes. Soon we were at the road opening again, and we saw a civilian jeep go down with some cadets in it.

“Sh\*t they got a lift,” I said.

“They’ll get caught, I’m sure,” Vishal said, “there are so many check points.”

“Guys, there’s an Army truck coming slowly, let’s climb that?” I said hurriedly. It seemed that we would be able to jump behind it in time. We had to make a quick decision.

“Let’s do it, nobody will stop the Army vehicle,” Tiwari said, and we decided to jump on to the rear of the truck. At the right moment, we made the jump, lifted the flap and realized that it was carrying some supplies for the camp.

After an hour, the truck started slowing down to a halt. We peeped from a hole and saw that there were four other vehicles in front, and a check-up was going on.

“Guys, time to get out now,” Shukla said with a tensed voice.

“Let’s jump and just run together for our lives,” I said, “don’t stop even if they shout. They don’t know us, till they actually catch us.”

“Yeah, we’ll run straight—full speed for 100m and then disappear into the bushes,” Tiwari said and we opened the flap. It was still quite dark, probably around 0300hrs. We could hear some

officers asking questions. The adrenaline was running at its peak now, as we looked nervously at the right moment to jump and run, in the backward direction.

“Go,” Tiwari exclaimed, and we all jumped and started running straight.

“Stop, all of you,” a voice shouted from the rear.

“Keep running...full throttle,” I shouted, as we all sprinted forward. In five minutes, we regrouped near a huge banyan tree, after signaling each other with a specific bird sound. We saw that our pursuers had lost track, and had found another group in one of the vehicles.

“So far, so good,” I said, “I think we’re not far now.”

“Let’s take that route through the village,” Chaddha said, indicating towards a few lights. We reached the campsite early morning, and saw that three groups had reached before us. Later in the morning, we had a good session with officers, and each group had their own story to share. Apparently, the enemy captured one group thrice throughout the night, and one group actually asked for lift from a civilian jeep where two officers were sitting in civvies, intentionally (hah hah!). In the end, it was an awesome experience, and we actually executed the adage—“do whatever you want, don’t get caught.”

Rovers finished with the Josh run—the 25km run back to the academy in full combat dress, with all the 20kg something equipment. Immediately after reaching the academy, our near-dead bodies sprinted away for the obstacle course, followed by the firing competition. We came 4 th in Camp Rovers—overall. After reaching my cabin, I looked at myself in the mirror. Yes, the face looked tired and all tanned up, but there was this explicit confidence from what the Academy had made me by now. I took another picture from my camera so that in times to come, I can remember—if I can go through this, nothing is impossible.

End-of-term came with many privileges inside the Squadron. On top of that, “Radio Mirchi” the first FM channel in Pune, went live around the same time. This made the

end-of-term musical, now that we were going to be 5 th termers, and music could be heard outside our cabins. The 100 th course had a stunning passing out parade, and we all left for home-sweet-home thereafter.

Close To Godliness

We were quite senior in the Academy now, and the feeling sank in right from the first day. Within the Squadron, life was much better, with more privileges. Outside the Squadron, it was still a cat and mouse chase with the 6<sup>th</sup> term appointments. From this

term, all three services were to have separate service classes.

Thankfully, academic classes were still common.

After around a month, it was time for the Novices boxing competition for the 1<sup>st</sup> termers—the 106<sup>th</sup> course. I had one place-type pal in this batch—Gaurav Sharma, and he came into my cabin after lunch one day.

“Mishra sir, I have my bout today evening,” Gaurav said, “any tips or tricks?”

“Just go in with a lot of josh Gaurav, it’s only ‘Novices’

boxing,” I said getting up, and took out my box of goodies from home. “Have this, and go in with full confidence.”

“At every opportunity, hit, and hit hard,” I said, “don’t under or over-estimate your opponent.”

“Right sir,” he said, having a handful of sweets.

“Keep your Guard up,” I said, punching him as he ducked backwards, in a counter move.

“I still don’t have those ‘washboard abs’ that you have,” he said, coming on to his feet again.

“Yeah well, all in good time,” I said, smiling reassuringly.

“How was your Novices, did you win?” Gaurav asked, looking at the collage of sports cars, bikes and female celebrities on my cupboard in admiration (again, a 5<sup>th</sup> term privilege).

“Yes, absolutely, but in my case,” I said with a grin, “my bout lasted 50 seconds and I won.”

Back in 1 st term, my Novices boxing was with a well-built Bhutanese cadet. He had a stout built-up. I went in with full confidence, hiding any doubts on my own boxing abilities (or inabilities). In the first round, after a few misses from both of us, one of my blows hit his nose hard. The referee immediately blew the whistle since the blood was flowing out rapidly. There was some rule by virtue of which, the bout finished immediately, and I won. It was great to see the referee holding my hand up, when the photos came out a week later.

“I hope, I have that luck with me,” Gaurav said, hearing my story on Novices boxing .

“Whatever it is, just do your best. ‘ Novices’ is all about the ‘ josh ’—the winning spirit, everybody has at least one weakness and can be conquered,” I said, “win and come.”

His bout was with a Lima 1 st termer, and he won it after a full-fledged match. Later that day, in the evening, after a game of basketball I took my team to the ropes.

“Mishra, let’s give them a demo,” Verma said, coming in from the next court.

“Yeah, let’s give a demo of 2 nd class rope, toe touch and chest touch,” I said, moving towards the rope.

“All of you get on your hands,” I said to my team, and then called out to one of the 4 th termers, “Negi, make them do plank-type pushups and then the ropes.”

5 th term was the time when every cadet was at the prime of fitness, and we could go “bang-bang-bang” on the chest touch bar (the sight I had seen in my 1 st term).

Later in the evening, we came to know that during the day, the Squadron officers had done a surprise check-up of the cabins, and had found some questionable magazines . It's not that they didn't always know about it, but they needed a reason to punish, and had got that.

After dinner, as expected, there was a Squadron hierarchy punishment report. Few 5 th termers rogered the junior courses separately, 4 th termers gave puttee parade to another Sergeant and after lights-out, all of us 5 th termers reported to the SCC

in drill order. Then came the announcement for 6 th termers—

“Pay attention Fighter Squadron—‘No Movement’ Fighter Squadron  
—‘No Movement’ Fighter Squadron.”

“No Movement” was executed when 6 th term course had a punishment to the Adjutant, or to the Squadron officers. All juniors were supposed to sit on their study chair throughout the “No Movement”

period, and stay awake. No form of life could see the Gods in punishment dress. Essentially, it was as a mark of respect in the sense that we do not sleep while they are getting rogered.

While waiting for “No Movement” to get over, my mind went into a flash back mode, and reminisced the last few minutes of my interview during the SSB days.

“ Are you a good team player Siddhant? ” the Colonel had asked, looking at me intently. We had already discussed lot of other things.

“ Yes sir , ” the prompt reply came, “ I firmly believe that if an objective has to be achieved, the team-spirit – camaraderie — the

“we-are-one-team” approach is essential. ” I had picked up that word “camaraderie” straightaway from one of the War movies. It was only in the years at NDA that I had realized the true meaning of that word.

“ So, other than the fact that you’ve lived in an Army environment, why do you really want to join the Army? Don’t tell me that you’re willing to die for your country, serve the nation,

or worst — don’t have any other career path. I’ve heard a lot of such statements. Give me your answer in a maximum of five words.

”

I had a reasonably good answer in mind, but he had twisted the question a bit. I decided to go with whatever came to my heart on what I was really looking for. After a brief silence of 3-5

seconds, the words came out.

“ Respect, Honor, Courage, Leadership, Integrity ,” I said with a brief pause and emphasis after every word, and had looked at him confidently.

Well, the SSB days were quite an experience by itself. The “No Movement” ended with another announcement late at night, and next day life went on as usual.

Around mid of the term, on one of the double drill days, D-Lo got furious at the course. At the end of the period, he asked the entire course to stay put at the QM Fort (a fort-like building where all the drill rifles were kept), after returning the rifles.

“What’s wrong with him really?” I asked Shukla, while keeping my rifle in the rack.

“I guess he’s totally pissed-off with all 5 th termers,” Shukla said, “but today he was getting way too finicky.”

“Guess we’ll have to miss breakfast today,” I sighed, looking at the stream of drill instructors flowing in through the gate.

“Yeah, D-Lo will probably give a course ET punishment,” Shukla said, following my gaze.

“ Yeh saara course fall-in ho jao quickly se ,” an instructor shouted angrily.

There was a huge ruckus, as cadets returned the rifles and instructors tried to bring some order. There was still some chaos, as D-Lo came out of the parade ground, closer to the main gate.

“ Drill ustads, ye 102 course ko ikkatha kariye, inka bhoot banayenge ,” he shouted, ready to figuratively start the machine gun fire.

Suddenly a couple of cadets made a dash and sprinted past him through the gate. As if by instinct, there was a loud roar, and rest of the course started running out of the gate.

“ Rokiye inko ,” D-Lo shouted at the drill ustads, asking them to stop the crowd.

“ 102 course ki jai ,” somebody shouted in the rushing crowd. The entire course sprinted out of the QM fort with chants of “ 102 course ki jai .”

The sight was of a “ Go” to a cross-country race, and this was the typical example of a gadar (chaos) in Academy lingo. It’s difficult to pin-point the troublemakers in a mob and in this case, willingly or unwillingly the entire course had fallen on the wrong side of D-Lo.

At night that day, after dinner, there was an announcement in the Squadron for all of us.

“Pay attention Fighter Squadron—all 5 th termers carry on to CSM’s cabin immediately.”

Use of “carry on to” instead of “sprint down to” in the announcement, was a respect we had earned with seniority. In a short while, we were all down in front of CSM’s cabin, mostly in dressing gowns.

“5 th termers, we heard about what happened today,” the CSM said, looking amused, “what was the need of ‘102 course ki jai ’

anyway?”

“Really, are you guys initiating some kind of a revolt—‘ Angrezo bhaarat chhodo ’ type?” another 6 th termer sitting in CSM’s cabin asked, laughing his guts off.

“It just so happened sir, it was a complete chaos—a gadar ,” one of us said. “The course was going to be ‘taken-care-of’ as it is, so everyone just charged ahead.”

“You have got one course ‘Singarh hike’ this Sunday, and five ET punishments,” the CSM said.

“Yah-Yah!” one of the other sixth termers passing the hallway laughed away.

We all just smiled at each other. The punishments were daunting of course, but the adrenalin was still high from the morning events.

“Finish these off guys, and steer clear of these unnecessary punishments.”

The next few days were rough, and the Adjutant asked the Academy appointments to tighten the noose around all 5 th termers. Next Sunday we all went for the physically taxing “Singarh”

punishment, which was a 26km run (with all our gear of course), to the top of the Singarh fort (and back). What started as a mass number running forward became an extended line of running figurines in half an hour. There were old timers who had run many Singarhs in the last two years, and those like me who had hardly

run any. After collecting the token from the drill instructor on top, we turned around to start the downhill run.

“Look at that group of college-goers,” Bhalla said to me, while I pocketed the token.

I looked up, wiping sweat from my forehead, at the youngsters sitting on their bikes, frolicking away on a picnic.

“Yeah, Singarh has an entirely different meaning to civilians,” I said, and then looked down at the route back to the Academy, and Pune city on the other side.

“The view is awesome,” I continued, looking at the resplendent beauty on the other side (the scenery , not the girls).

“Let’s start now,” Bhalla said, “we’ll come back to Singarh, few years after passing out.”

“Yeah,” I said, speeding up our steps and starting the run back,

“we’ll come back as officers, in our bikes and cars.”

Our course punishments went on for a few days, and the issue with D-Lo was resolved soon thereafter. I was amongst the good-in-drill types, so few of the punishments got converted to better ones. Life came back to normal in the Academy. Rest of the days passed away peacefully and soon enough, the 101 st course handed over the power officially to the 102 nd course.

The passing out parade (POP) was spectacular, and the moment the last cadet of 101 st course marched out in slow-march, we all became 6 th termers officially. In a few hours, I left for the railway station; off to home.

### Final Term At Nda

The 6 th term started with a lot of gusto. There was lot of josh in all of us for making a difference in the final term. Taking the central staircase, and all other privileges didn’t matter anymore, since we were Gods now—literally. The Academy Cadet Captain—ACC of our batch was Raj Singh Dhavan (from Mike Squadron). It so happened that his brother was the ACA of the previous course. Luckily, I never had any big ego issues with the Senior Dhavan throughout the 5 th term. Vishal Paul from our Squadron became the ACA, and that brought smiles to Foxtrot 5 th termers.

On the first Sunday, we went for a friendly run in the morning to the Khadakwasla dam area. After reaching the dam, the entire Squadron sat down and we discussed the strategy for this term.

After some time the Squadron dispersed and all 6 th termers gathered. We were all sitting around a puddle of water.

“Guys we need to put in our best this term,” Shukla said, “our overall Squadron position should go up from 6 th to 1 st and we

need to get the ‘ banner .’ ” Shukla was the SCC of the Squadron and Tiwari was the CSM. The Champion Squadron used to get the banner at the end of the term, based on points from all Inter-Squadron competitions.

“Finally, we’ll get to run the Squadron the way we always wanted to,” I said, throwing a pebble into the water.

“Yeah, it’s our time and this is it,” Shukla sighed and continued with a grin, “We are chhakkas now, finally.”

“Yah-Yah!” we all said happily.

“Next few days, we’ll discuss who all will be responsible for cross country, drill competition, academics, football etc.”

Tiwari said.

We had some more discussions, and then went on to the daily Academy routine. We started practicing for the two games for the term—football and volleyball, cross-country and all other competitions.

D-Lo had chosen me and five other course-mates for the Nishan Toli for our Passing-out-Parade. In the best of traditions of the Armed Forces, the Nishan Toli is supposed to bring on the

“President’s Colors,” to the parade. The Nishan Toli comprised of the Nishan Dharak in the center who held the Flag (the colors), guarded by the Nishan Rakshaks on both sides (marching with rifles). The “President’s

Colors" were the pride of the Academy, and the President of India awarded these to NDA in 1978.

" Cadets, jab Nishan Toli march karega, poora Academy salute dega aur poora audience aapko dekh raha hoga , " D-Lo said to all six of us one morning, stating the importance of our role.

" Ji sahab , " we said in unison.

" Kal all ke all , 1400hrs baje Nishan Toli practice , " D-Lo said sternly.

There were essentially two Tolis (or groups) of three cadets each, so that in the event of a last moment mishap, there's a Plan B for the final parade. In the final parade, only one of the Tolis will take the Nishan , and others will join the respective Squadrons for the parade. I was one of the Nishan Rakshaks and this was a proud feeling by itself.

" Aap Nishan Rakshak ho, aur aapke Rifle movements se agar poora parade ground nahi hila, to hamara naam yaad rakhoge , " D-Lo said to us and we acknowledged his point. All his dialogues were path-breaking. This time he wanted us to make the entire Parade ground tremble with our Rifle movements.

" Ji sahab , " we all shouted with lot of gusto.

" Ooncha shouting, Ooncha stamping, Kadam Taal " D-Lo exclaimed, and took us inside.

Being the selected few, we did get some privileges in terms of punishments. However, to earn that, we toiled, burnt sweat and dug our feet on the parade ground, while others were probably taking a quick nap in the afternoon.

The days went by and one day there was a Guest Lecture by a Retired IAS officer in the Habibullah Hall. It was a common understanding that some cadets will sleep, some of whom will definitely lose their I-slip to an appointment and get punished appropriately. That was the way of life. After the end of the Lecture, the chief guest and other officers had left, and we were just waiting for the official permission to break off.

“Start pumping a\*\*hole,” Bhalla said angrily to a doubtful 5 th termer from Oscar, who was sleeping away to glory earlier, in our row. Generally, Academy appointments took the headache of straightening out the 5 th termers, but sometimes others too pitched in.

“10 up, 10 back, 10 left, and 10 right,” I said to him, looking behind at the rest of the academy.

“Mishra, remember our time when we used to sit frozen in terror, immediately after the end of the movie/lecture?” Bhalla asked, following my gaze at the huge auditorium. There was lot of action happening in the area right in front of the first row, and rest of the juniors were just sitting up straight (unless they were doing pushups or rolling somewhere).

“Yeah it was so hard to stay awake; paragliding over an active volcano would have been easier,” I chuckled, and turned towards the 5 th termer on his hands with frowned eyebrows.

“10-10-10-10,” I said.

“Yeah, imagine, all this will never come back,” Bhalla said,  
“another three months and we’ll pass out.”

“Bhalla, remember that time when...” I started off, remembering one of the incidents, when the ACC and ACA—Dhavan and Vishal came in from outside.

“6 th termers please settle down, all juniors go back to your seats,” Vishal announced.

“Academy sit-up,” Dhavan shouted, and the entire academy sat up straight as Major Ranvir Rai (the Adjutant) came in. The entire hall was in pin drop silence. The Adjutant took the report, took one angry look at the academy, and asked all appointments to step outside. One hour later, the scene had changed totally. There was

“No Movement” announced in all the Squadrons, and we spent the next few hours giving “puttee-parade” to the Adjutant. Unlike in 4 th term when “puttee-parade” was only about changing clothes quickly and running from our cabins to the central lobby, we had to now run from the respective Squadrons, to the Sudan Block within the specified time.

“What’s the agenda, any idea?” Ashish from Alpha Squadron said to me, as I came running on to the road wearing Blue Patrol dress.

“I heard... it’s because... the academy was sleeping,” I said in breaks, as we increased our running speed, to reach the Sudan Block in time.

“Guys, apparently the speaker said jokingly to the Commandant that most of the cadets were sleeping,” a Delta Dagger said, catching up with us, “the Commandant conveyed the needful to the Adjutant.”

“That makes some sense, it’s the butterfly effect,” I said, as we cut short through the Ashoka Pillar and sprinted to the Sudan Block entrance. Late at night, the “puttee-parade” got over, and next few days the Academy remained hot for all the juniors.

After few weeks, we left for the last camp—Camp Torna. Unlike the previous camps, this one focused more on the strategic and tactical aspects, rather than the physical and mental ones. There were several practical exercises on patrolling, tactical defence, ambush, cordon and search, etc. We had our own share of the physical rigor too of course. The Camp had a strenuous, exciting and competitive ending as always, and we moved on to our daily routine.

The DLTPO—“Days Left To Pass Out” was now 50 and our Passing-out-parade practices were going to start soon. One of the days after dinner, couple of us course-mates were sitting in CSM Tiwari’s cabin. Garje, had brought some homemade sweets and we were savoring on that.

“Garje, it reminds me of the ‘n’ number of times that we’ve come to you and Chaddha for home cooked stuff,” I said, remembering the old times fondly.

“Where’s he by the way,” Garje accepted modestly, “he said that we’ll meet after dinner.”

“I met him in the Mess,” Tiwari said, “He had to ‘take care’ of some 5 th termers.”

“Guys, I might sound a bit philosophical,” Shukla said, “and out-of-context, but I was just wondering today.”

“Shukla, are you going to drown us with your Moral Lecture again?” I teased him and asked.

“No buddy, seriously, I had a thought—how everything bad that happened in previous terms had a purpose,” Shukla said, getting into the mood now. “The bike-up for shoulders, the punishment runs for our legs, the pumping on ground for chest muscles...”

“The drastic ego crushing in the first few weeks of NDA,” Garje said, “puttee-parades probably to instill the habit of being aptly dressed in minimum time...”

“The rolling sessions for stomach, legs-up hands-down,” I said continuing the reminiscing mood, “multiple rope sessions, being finicky on turnout of dress to instill the need to look smart...”

“Developing the esprit de corps through course punishments, and group competitions,” Shukla sighed.

“We should probably ignore some points like heat sessions on tarred road leading to blisters and all,” Tiwari said grabbing another sweet, with a grin.

“Totally, but then again, now we’re mentally strong and trained to withstand any kind of torture,” I said, from another perspective.

“Yup, you can say that again,” Tiwari said thoughtfully. I smiled a wide smile.

“Okay...Totally, but then again now we’re mentally strong and trained to withstand....”

“Cut it out Mishra,” Shukla said, banging a pillow on my head.

“By the way Mishra, are you three going to be the final Nishan Toli ?” Garje asked.

“I don’t think so,” I said with a pause, “D-Lo was saying today that the other group is a tad better and has taller guys, so they would be the final Nishan Toli .”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Garje said.

“Yeah, it makes sense. So essentially, when the POP practice starts I will be the CSM Papa Squadron,” I said with a grin, “the right marker.”

There were 15 Squadrons in all—Alpha to Oscar. Therefore, to keep equal set of contingents on both halves of the parade ground, the passing out parade had 16 Squadrons in all (8 + 8). Papa Squadron (or P Squadron) was created out of cadets from the existing Squadrons. Non-appointment 6 th term cadets good in drill, acted as the appointments for the contingent.

“That’s great, I think Bhalla is going to be one of the three DCCs for P Squadron,” Shukla said.

“Our Squadron passing-out photo would be awesome, right?” I said with gleaming eyes.

“Yeah, so many appointments in one photo,” Verma said, “so, I know about others, have you got a ball partner yet?”

“Well, I told you about that my Dad’s Ex-Commanding Officer, right?” I said.

“Yup, his daughter was in Class 12 th with you,” Verma remembered faintly.

“Yeah, she’s doing her degree here,” I said, “she’ll come for the ball, along with sir and ma’am.”

“Imagine, you must be calling them uncle and aunty just a few years back.”

“Things change,” I said smiling, “it feels great to call the same uncles as sir now.”

It definitely was a great feeling, although it was awkward at times. I remember going to an Army party during the first term break. Mom was still invited at some of the parties in the station even after Dad’s demise, especially because of her mellifluous voice (awesome singer) and stage presence. After a few confusing greetings on “Good evening uncle” vs. “Good evening sir,” I stuck to “Good evening sir” even for the officers from Dad’s unit. My haircut spoke for itself as it is, so no explanation was required. Days passed away quickly and two days before our parents were to come in, it was time for the NDA Ball.

In the evening all 6 th termers reached the Mess promptly, dressed up smartly in uniform, putting on the best cologne and probably having bathed twice.

“Good evening sir, ma’am, and Palak, great that you could come,”

I said as they stepped out of the car. Other than the cadets, it was also party time for all the various instructors and officers in the Academy.

“Hi Siddhant, I couldn’t have missed this,” Palak said, looking lovely in an evening gown.

Almost all the buses from Pune city had arrived by now, with a dazzling set of ball partners. It was probably this one day when the beauty quotient of NDA as a whole, was at its peak. It was an awaited event for the city beauties too. Witnessing the royal grandeur of Military parties, great music and getting to shake a leg with smartly turned out cadets who were going to become Officers, had its own charm.

There were some nice-silly games, lots of dancing, some inaudible conversations, Mr. & Ms. NDA competition, some more dancing, and a nice dinner buffet. Soon it was time to bid farewell to all the angels who flew from Pune city. Immediately after the gals left is probably when there was maximum josh on the dance floor. All 6

th termers (now stags), danced their heart out (or at least jumped and stomped, if not danced), till the DJ pulled the plug.

Two days later, we had the farewell program in the respective Squadrons. Of course, the day was also the Grudges Day , and I had a fair share of cream-rolling, academy-helicopter and pushups to do for some juniors—all in good spirit. The next day, all parents started coming in and the Academy got ready for the D-Day.

“Siddhant, congratulations,” Mom said, hugging me tightly as I bowed down to touch her feet.

“We’re proud of you bhaiya ,” Vanshika said, joining into a family hug.

It was a proud moment for me, and there were good vibes all around. Vanshika had done well in the 12 th board exams, and was all set to pursue her engineering degree and higher studies. Mom also got additional responsibilities at school, and all teachers had a pay hike recently. Everything around was just fine.

“There are a lot of things planned for, before the passing out parade,” I said, taking their luggage into the cabin in the ground floor of our Squadron.

“Tomorrow morning we have the POP

practice, and then the convocation where we will get our graduation degree. In the evening there are some events that the juniors will perform in the Bombay Stadium and day after, will be the final POP.”

“By the way Vanshika Mishra,” I said not looking directly at her,

“I’ve heard that somebody has done awesome in 12 th boards.”

“Yeah well, that somebody is very modest,” she said with her head held high, and then quietly whispered with a wide smile, “and that somebody will humbly accept any gift—in cash or kind.”

“Once again congrats sis, you’re getting the latter, check in that cupboard,” I said, and went out to finish filling some forms.

The D-1 day was over in a jiffy, and we all had a great time with our parents. At night that day, the last day in the academy, I just thought—how the Academy had changed us forever. All useless chunks in the body—both from mental and physical perspective had been chiseled off, just like what a sculptor does while making a spectacular work of art. I looked at my back in the mirror, and saw the small “NDA birth mark”—proudly (from the initial rolling days).

That night, I had a memory flashback, and remembered the day when a dialogue reinforced my decision to join the NDA. It was the period when after three years of extensive treatment, my Dad had succumbed to Leukemia (Blood Cancer). During my summer vacations after Class XI, he had gone to New Delhi with Mom for a regular checkup, while Vanshika and I stayed back with our relatives. The dreaded news came as a big shock. Neither of us had known that his condition was so serious.

The immortalized video started playing in front of my eyes. It was Dad’s funeral day. In the Mortuary, as they brought his lifeless body in a stretcher, I wanted to shout—“ Dad, please wake up, talk to me... please Dad. ” Life had come to a standstill, he was right there but he was not there.

After a while, six Army officers came forward in a slow march, and placed the national flag on Dad’s body. In spite of my state of shock, I couldn’t help but notice the perfect synchronization with which they were carrying out the entire procedure. From there, they took his body to the Army Crematorium, with the band marching a slow-march in front.

There were many officers, who had come for the wreath laying ceremony before the cremation took place. It was heartening to see that almost all of them had never known him; but had come to pay their respect, just because he was a brother officer. This was followed by a gun salute and lifting of the national flag (again with synchronized moves), before the actual cremation took place.

Anyone who would have witnessed this, and probably wasn’t in the mental state that I was in, would have been in awe of the respect one gets in the Army. In the end, some of the officers came to meet me and say goodbye.

There was one uncle, who had served with Dad earlier in Bangalore. I remembered him distinctly since his kids and I used to play together.

He came forward, gave me a good hug and said just one thing—“

Siddhant join the NDA .” It was as if Dad was conveying to me indirectly, what he had always wanted to say. Dad was not an Ex-NDA, and had always praised officers from the academy. He had never really asked me, but I knew that he would have wanted me to be an Ex-NDA Army officer.

I switched off the light, and made an entry in my Diary, finishing with—“ Papa, I’m passing out of the NDA tomorrow, hope I made you proud .”

Early morning 0500hrs, we were all in QM Fort wearing White Patrols, getting ready with our rifles and swords for the POP. We were all full of josh like never before.

“All ‘ ke’ all 6 th termers, fall-in,” drill instructors were shouting. Rest of the Academy was standing to one side. For them it was the end of the term, and for us, an entirely different feeling altogether.

“All ‘ ke’ all 6 th termers 10,000 flat foots carry on,” D-Lo shouted with a smile, and we smiled back knowing that he would be the last person on earth, to have any inch of our uniform move away from its place today.

The Adjutant came in and faced all of us, while we quickly came to a standstill.

“6 th termers, how’s the josh ?” Major Ranvir Rai, SM hauled out, with his smile and mustache extending from side to side.

“High sir,” we all shouted aloud.

“Today’s the day, all your...” he started giving some prep talks, cracked a traditional joke and got us in the mood for the parade.

It was soon time to march off, and the drill instructors opened the huge gates of QM Fort. We could see from a distance that the Parade ground was already full of parents and other officers sitting in a distance, waiting with

expecting eyes. The Chief of Air Staff (CAS) was going to review the parade, and we all waited in anticipation to hear his morale boosting words he was going to share with us.

The moment the band started playing and the ACC gave out the command, the parade started and the contingents marched inside smartly. We all reached our respective locations on the ground, and after a series of commands by the ACC, the next one came for the salute.

“Parade,” Dhavan hauled out, “ Salaami Shastra !”

Bang! Bang ! Bang ! Bang !

The rifles went off with four loud bangs as the entire Academy performed the salute in perfect synchrony. D-Lo had once said to us that the sound while banging the rifles should be such that all birds flying in the vicinity, should fly in saavdhan mudra (attention position), and ask each other if 102 course is passing out today. What sense of humor!

It was a picturesque sight with the contingents marching to the bands, and displaying spectacular skills with the rifle and sword movements. After the review from the chief guest, and completing one round of the Parade ground, it was time for the speech by the Chief of Air Staff. He stood on the Quarterdeck, and gave an awe-

inspiring speech. The Quarterdeck had a 100ft Mast (just like the one on a ship), and hosted India’s Flag and the NDA Flag.

A general announcement throughout the parade, kept the parents and others in the audience abreast of what was happening.

Towards the end of the parade, came the moment we had all been waiting for—the dheere-chaal (slow march). The band started playing the mesmerizing strains of—“ Auld Lang Syne.” This was the tune, which brought about fond memories to every officer—of any rank, and of any of the three services. All 6 th termers then started the dheere-chaal towards the Quarterdeck and rest of the academy started moving out of the parade ground the same way.

Simultaneously, there were first termers who had climbed the mast, shouting out cheers for the passing out course. Sukhoi & MIG 27 aircrafts were flying over the Quarterdeck as cadets crossed the – antim-pagh (last step). The entire atmosphere was spectacular and spellbinding. One could hear pure jubilation from the Science Block, right behind the Quarterdeck where 6 th termers (who had crossed the antim-pagh ), were rejoicing at one end. Some of them were actually doing knuckle pushups with their Squadron-types, and others were just throwing their caps in the air and having fun.

“Bhaiya , we saw you,” Vanshika said with excitement, when I met them later in the Squadron, “I saw you before Mom did, you were wearing a red sash.”

“Yes, you sure did,” Mom said to Vanshika, and started packing some of my clothes.

“Vanshika, you clicked good photos, right?” I said hopefully.

“Oh yes of course, what time are we leaving?”

“We’ll leave in two hours,” I said, looking out of the room, for any junior who could help.

“Hey Rana,” I called out to a 2 nd termer, and then turned towards Mom. “I’ll just return the last few items, and get the clearance.”

In an hour, I finished everything and went to meet other course-mates and collect contact numbers, especially of the Air Force and Navy guys.

“Mishra, are you leaving the city in the evening?” Bhalla asked, writing his e-mail address.

“Yup, all the best for the Air Force Academy buddy,” I said, taking the small chit of paper.

“Yeah, we’ll all do well. Once a Foxy, always a Foxy.”

In a few hours, we were off to the station. As we crossed the Academy gates, I turned around to see the board with golden plates—"Cradle of Military Leadership" and a gust of nostalgia touched my heart. In my mind I said, "Goodbye NDA, IMA here I come."

The stay at home was only for 20 days and we had to report to IMA Dehradun after the end of it. On one reminiscing evening, I realized how life had been going on at home these three years without Dad, and me too being in a different world altogether. I was in awe of Mom's positive approach to life, and always having a smile to spare. Right from those difficult times when Dad passed away, she had been single-handedly managing her new job in the Army School as a Teacher, and the entire house. Vanshika, at this tender age had learnt so much, and had adapted to all the inflictions that life had thrown across to her. She had endured many hardships, and was emotionally more mature than those of her age group. In spite of everything, she was always optimistic, spiritual (to an extent), and chirpy.

I guess the Army teaches not only the personnel, but also their families to be resilient and never give up. Few trips, few lunches and few dinners later, it was time to leave.

"It's "all in the mind" they said, nothing is impossible, We will now verge on to see, if all this is actually plausible."

### Ima: Last Leg Of The Climb

The IMA for us Ex-NDAs was one year of training, and for other courses like DE—"Direct Entry" (coming after B.Sc. + entrance exam & SSB), it was 1.5yrs (three terms) training. We were going to join directly into the second term of the 112 th Regular course. We were now Gentleman Cadets or GCs , from Cadets, back in NDA days.

It was 1700hrs in the evening, when I reached the railway station at Dehradun. I took my luggage, reached the Academy and finished the initial registration. I was now a part of—Naushera Company, Cariappa Battalion. In about three hours, the entire course was standing in the Chetwode Building. The Chetwode building was the administrative building here,

named after Field Marshal Sir Philip Chetwode, and housed the parade ground.

After the initial so-called welcome speech, the Adjutant, who by design wasn't happy about the overall discipline of the course, asked the appointments to "take care" of us. Most of these appointments were the same Ex-NDAs that we had dealt with in the 5th term (when they were 6th termers). In a few minutes, hell broke loose and all the airs of being a God in NDA, vanished into thin air. There were even DE appointments who were taking some

extra initiative, probably just to satisfy their ego of being our seniors.

"Hi buddy, long time," I said taking a roll, to a Hunter Squadron course-mate.

"Hi Mishra, yeah the term break finished so soon," he said taking another roll slowly.

"Looks like this will go on the entire night," I said, looking at the long line of GCs rolling down the slope of the road.

Apparently, they were taking us rolling to our Battalion (known as the gaddha Battalion, since it was in a geographical depression).

"Yeah, thankfully we don't start from scratch here, one year and we'll finally be out," he said, turning around to see if anyone was watching.

"Keep rolling fu\*\*ers, we'll make a 'bhoot' out of you tonight,"

an appointment shouted loudly from behind.

Well, bhoot we did become, especially after an apparently traditional dip into a small pond with foul-smelly water. This was the beginning of our time at IMA.

"Hi Siddhant, I'm Gaurav Mehrotra," a DE course-mate came in smiling to my room, when I reached early morning 0300hrs.

“Hi Gaurav,” I said looking up, “you’re still up at 0300hrs?”

“Yeah well, guess you’d like to wash up.”

“Definitely, I smell worse than a stinking pig,” I said, opening my luggage for a fresh set of clothes.

“Yeah do that,” he grinned away, “there’s the bathroom, hot water comes 24hrs,” he said indicating towards the corner.

“Thanks Gaurav, see you in a couple of hours in the 0600hrs report to CSM,” I said and went off for a wash.

The term started and most of the activities—Games, Physical Training, Cross-country competition, long-range firing, camps, punishments etc. were run-of-the-mill to us now.

One fine night after dinner, our entire course was rolling on the ground for some reason. By 2300hrs, thanks to the slow reactions by all of us, the rolling was still on and by now we were all only in shorts (nothing on top). It was a chilly winter evening in Dehradun.

“Get up,” one of the appointments shouted sternly, “enough of this drama, put on your shirts and get wet with all clothes on.”

“Sh\*t, it’s so freaking cold here,” Rishi (one of the ex NDAs) said, when we all reached the bathroom.

“Yeah, at least we never had to worry about getting wet in cold water back in NDA,” said Nikhil, opening the shower, and stepping inside.

“The water is 100 o C,” said Rishi, running out with a grin after touching it.

“ Bhalu , at least ‘you’ don’t talk about feeling cold,” I chuckled. We had named Rishi as bhalu (Hindi word for a Bear) because of the hairy body that he had.

“With wet clothes on, it’ll be even worse guys,” said Tiwari coming out of the shower. He was a DE.

“Come out dukkis ,” a voice shouted angrily, “finish off your rain dance and get rolling.”

We came out and they took us rolling to the platoon area. Soon enough, the entire course was rolling—backwards, sideways and cream-rolling here and there.

“Get up all of you,” a sadistic senior broke in, “and stand in one line.”

There were at least ten seniors standing there by now, and gossiping. Some of them came in just to witness the fun probably.

By now, we had all gone into auto mode, and even our “takers”

knew that beyond a point you can’t really “take” anyone. It was damn cold and we just stood there, shivering like hell.

“Do you want to stand, or roll?” one of them asked.

“We’ll roll sir,” some of us said.

“It’s better than standing, sir,” I said. Rolling at least generated some heat in the body, just by virtue of the action.

Standing still just made the cool winds pinch our body every second.

“Take off your shirts,” the CSM came in and said, and we did so.

“Can you see those lights, far away in the mountains? What place is that?”

We looked at the distant lights far away in the hills. It was Mussoorie city, a pleasant hill station few hours from Dehradun.

I intended to visit the place before passing out.

“Mussoorie sir,” we all shouted together, stammering a bit with shaky lips.

“Stop fidgeting like girls, and stop moving,” someone said.

“Sethi, stop fu\*\*in shaking like a pendulum in fast-forward,”

another senior shouted.

All of us were trying to stand straight, but couldn’t really help the shiver down the spine.

“People are partying there at this moment, heaters are blowing hot air in the rooms, honeymoon couples are probably cuddling up, imagine all that,” he said. All of us looked at the patch of lights in the hill, with a steady gaze.

“Now imagine that, and take in all the heat from those lights,”

another senior jumped in abruptly, “and keep standing still.” We all stood motionless for a minute or so, with eyes on Mussoorie lights.

“Anyone who shakes even a hair on his head will go in for a cold dip, and keep standing here,” another senior said from behind, with a notable smile.

“What sadistic pleasure,” I said slowly. It was hard to keep out the physical experience of cold, and send these supposed signals of warmth to my brain.

“Three cheers to Mussoorie nights ,” one senior said behind us.

“Mohit, remember that Mussoorie night when...” we heard the voices fade away, as most of the seniors left. It was all in good spirit and after an hour, we ended up sharing some jokes and stories with the two sadistic seniors still left. After some time, the course dispersed.

The term passed away peacefully and the most distinct memory retained was of Camp Bhadraj. At the peak of one of the hills visible from the academy, the Bhadraj temple was situated, in the (relatively) same line of hills as the Mussoorie city. This camp was more on the lines of mountain warfare, and other military tactics. After the end of the term, instead of going home, all GCs went for “hikes” to different places. About thirty of us went to Himachal Pradesh, and our group had a great time visiting some of the units in these high altitude areas, and experiencing fresh snow first hand.

The 3rd term at IMA, which was essentially our final passing out term, started with great enthusiasm. On the drill front, the equivalent of our NDA's D-Lo was Subedar Dinesh Singh Rathore

(a.k.a. DSR), a terror in the academy. Right from the first drill period of the term, we got a dose of his peevish mood—

“Kabadi GCs waaakkke up, ye tumhara drill hai? Behosh hone tak an-ginat ‘flat-foot’ carry on...Hhaaffff.”

How convenient, we were supposed to keep doing flat-foots until we’re unconscious, or reach the upper limit of ‘countless’, whatever comes first. The ‘Hhaaffff’ part was just a volley of air gushing out every time, as he finished his command.

“Kabadi GCs...aapka stamping accha nahi hai...aapke paier ke neeche murgi andaa rakhegi, to woh bhi nahi tutega....Hhaaffff.”

This one took the dialogues to another level. How bad can one’s stamping be, that even an egg kept below the boots cannot be cracked (very creative, indeed)?

The training in the next few months was enriching. We went through a jungle warfare module, learnt how to survive off the terrain, and make snake-snacks. Then there was a simulated battle drill in a live scenario, where we had to crawl through long wet trenches with all kinds of explosions happening around us. The final term camps exposed us to various counter-insurgency and advanced military tactics.

We were all now primed up to join the Armed Forces, brimming with OLQs (Officer-Like-Qualities) and soon it was time for allocation of arms and services. I was going to join my father’s regiment, the Corps of EME and had a 1-year attachment with an Infantry Battalion of the Madras Regiment before that. The day we came to know of this, I met my company’s drill instructor—Hav. Dharam Raj. I was going to join his parent unit.

“ Saab, aapki paltan mei attachment karne jaa rahaa hu ,” I said to him happily, with glinting eyes (going to do my attachment in your Battalion).

“ GC Siddhant, aap jis paltan mei jaa rahein hain, uska dusra naam hai ‘Khatra , ’ ” he said proudly. Apparently, the nickname for the Battalion was ‘Danger’. He had always spoken highly of his Battalion to us, and had always stated that none of us was good enough for it. I gulped just at the sound of that. God only knew what was in store for me.

“ Jaisa aapne yaha drill kiya hai, us hi josh se bahut accha Officer baniye , ” he said, looking at me with hope.

I smiled and confirmed, now a bit relaxed. I had generally been in the good books of drill instructors here too (lucky me).

“ Jaaiye aur paltan ka naam raushan kariye, line tod !” he commanded (carry on and keep the unit’s name high) and sent me off.

In a few weeks, it was the day of final POP, with Mom and Vanshika, and all other parents looking at the parade. In the end, we moved out of the parade ground in dheere-chaal (slow march) with the band playing, the heart whelming tone of “ Auld Lang Syne .” After stepping on to the antim-pagh (the last step—

literally), it was time for the oath taking ceremony. It was a fantastic sight with all of us Officers taking the oath to serve

& protect the nation, with the course bursting with energy. The National Anthem and songs like “ Ae mere watan ke logo …” had always been an energy booster for me. However, saluting the National Flag today had taken a different meaning altogether. In a while, it was time for the Piping-ceremony. I caught hold of my cap (after throwing it in the air) and went towards Mom and Vanshika.

“ Mom wait, we’ll take a picture of before-and-after,” Vanshika said, pointing the camera at me. All parents had been waiting eagerly for this moment, when they would remove the cloth over the shoulder epaulettes (which covered the ranks) of their son.

“ Sure, go ahead,” I said to her, while I stood with Mom proudly.

Mom took off the dark olive green covers, to reveal two shining brass stars on both shoulders.

“Congratulations Lt. Siddhant Mishra,” Mom said to me proudly, with tears of joy in her eyes.

I bowed down to touch her feet, and hugged Vanshika happily. This was a proud moment for not only me, but also for them.

I went back to my room and looked at the small photo of Dad in uniform, the photo that had kept me going on all this while. My mind went back a couple of years in flashback (not in black and white though). I was sitting in the garden, after school (still in school dress), and Dad had just come from office for lunch, wearing his impeccable uniform.

“Siddhant,” he said, sitting next to me, keeping the few office files on a table.

“Yes Papa,” I replied, looking up from a newspaper.

“The NDA Application form has come out in the Employment paper,” he said.

“I’ve already filled it up and sent it Papa,” I said in a confident tone.

“Hmm, okay good,” he had said with a feeling of satisfaction, which wasn’t quite conspicuous.

I knew very well, that although he never said so, he wanted me to join the Army (through NDA). The mind returned to the “Present Tense,” as I heard Mom coming towards my cabin.

“Papa, I’m now an Army officer. I promise that I’ll be a good soldier, a good human being, a Foxy Fighter, a good Officer and a Gentleman for life.”

I stamped a step back smartly, and saluted his photo. Bang! Bang!

Salute!

I had been waiting to do this all these years with stars on my shoulder, and imagined him returning the salute—wherever he was.

Finally, we wrapped up and went home.

“Courage, Humility & Integrity were words that now defined me, I was now a trained soldier and an Officer of the Indian Army.”

### Adorned The Olive Greens

It was 1700hrs, and there was an ongoing thunderous downpour. The train finally arrived at the platform in Siliguri, which was the nearest railway station to my place of posting. My Madras Regiment Battalion had just come back from Kashmir Valley and this was a Modified Field (a level closer to Peace , vis-à-vis Field ) location. I had also heard that it was a family station, not that marriage was in the cards for quite some time anyway. It was dark, with rain affecting the visibility. I saw two Army men in evening sports dress coming forward with umbrellas.

“ Lt. Mishra sahab ,” one of them asked, from under the umbrella.

He was a young recruit.

“Yes,” I said, getting down.

“ Namaskaram sahab ,” he said, looking behind for my luggage, “ aapka samaan ?”

I showed them the luggage, and went towards the shade with a bag in hand. My black Iron trunk had a label in white paint. It said

—“Lt. Siddhant Mishra, IMA Dehradun to Siliguri.”

“ Namaskaram Sahab , Subedar Anirudh ,” a JCO (Junior Commissioned Officer) came forward, introducing himself as we reached the parking. The ranks coming under the category of a JCO

are one of the highest ranks achievable, when starting as a ground soldier. The Jeep started, and my luggage followed in another vehicle behind.

“ Aapki bahut tareef suni hai Sahab ,” the JCO said (heard a lot of good things about you), as we moved on.

“ Accha sahab ?” I acknowledged with a surprised smile, guessing that our IMA drill instructor had sent that good feedback.

“ Haa sahab, waise Monday se aap ek Operation pe jaa rahein hai

,” Subedar Sunil, another JCO continued, “ Havildar Samir aapko details batayega .”

I gave an acknowledgement, apparently there was an Operation starting Monday. I wondered if there would be any time for settling down. These JCOs spoke well, were smart, and left a good impression on me.

I stayed in the barracks that night, with other men. A Young Officer should know his men in and out, and staying with them initially did make sense to me. Next day, I had the CO’s (Commanding Officer’s) interview at 0800hrs, and I was there well before time. The CO’s office looked majestic from outside, and there were two bulbs on top—red and green (red bulb being a bad time to disturb him). His name stood out in shining brass letters

—“Col. A Avinash.”

“May I come in sir?” I asked after knocking twice, once the bulb was green.

“Come in,” a deep and husky voice said from inside. Bang! Bang!

Salute!

I entered and saw a smart officer—well built, fair skin and thick black mustache, sitting behind a huge table. Col. Avinash looked a bit young to be a Colonel, but maybe it was just his aura. He had an air of—“having-been-there-done-that” hanging around him.

He asked me to have a seat.

“Siddhant, welcome to the Battalion, so...” and then began some generic conversation about the academy, background, etc.

“Siddhant, as a youngster you’ll make mistakes, learn from them.

You might encounter officers with blown-up ego; take it in stride. Lead from the front with humility, your men will watch you at every step,” he said sharing his wisdom and the discussion continued for a while.

Although Col. Avinash maintained a smile on his face, I could see that those piercing eyes could skin a man to his bone.

Nevertheless, his words were so inspiring that by the end of it, there was a machine gun burst firing in my stomach and I was all set to step out and prove myself. After the interview, I went to overlook a training session of some men. Everything was going fine for now. Around 1200hrs, a soldier came running and asked me to go to the Adjutant’s office. While I walked back to the office, it was a great feeling—receiving salutes from all the men passing by, and returning the same. Yes, I was an officer now.

“May I come in sir?” I asked, saluting the Adjutant, who was deep into some files.

“Come in Siddhant,” he said and looked up.

For a moment, I couldn’t believe my eyes. He was the same JCO (Subedar Sunil), who had come to welcome me in the station yesterday.

“Hi Siddhant, I’m Major Sunil, welcome to the Battalion,” he said with a grin, motioning towards the chair.

“Sir, yesterday...” I started saying, still confused. He interrupted me.

“Never mind what happened yesterday Siddhant, it was just a small surprise welcome. The ‘welcome’ in the Valley is far more exciting,” he said with a pleasing smile, “you can meet Lt.

Satbir and Maj. Anirudh later.”

That was a comforting thought. All these officers had gone out of their way for the welcome. I had heard of such stories but didn't think that this would be done here as well. It turned out that even the CO interview was a farce, and the officer playing that role was Maj Avinash. I finally met Colonel Malhotra, the Commanding Officer, after lunch.

In the evening, I went to meet Lt. Arun who was my immediate senior. He was an Ex-NDA and one course senior to me (Juliet Squadron-101). He was a smart fair hard core Jat, and it showed in his massive physique and accent. At NDA, juniors used to run away from him for obvious reasons. We got into a quick basketball game between us.

“Mishra, how come you never ran into me in NDA?” Arun sir asked, dribbling the ball away.

“I did sir. I was running away from you along with other 4 th termers once,” I said, remembering the incident fondly. “Luckily for me, you yourself got caught by the ACA, for mounting the bike without a squad.”

“Oh yes, that ACA was one hell of an a\*\*hole,” he said with a lot of conviction, as I snatched the ball to shoot a basket.

“Never mind, first things first,” he continued, taking a rebound and shooting another basket. “Always keep a diary and a pen in hand, when you go around the unit.”

“Oh, okay sir,” I said stopping the game.

“In these initial days, you should always look busy,” he said opening into a smile. “Even if you have ‘NTDNTG’—‘Nothing-To-Do-Nowhere-To-Go,’ don’t roam around like a headless chicken. Always walk smartly with a focus on where you’re going.”

“Right sir, got it,” I said, that was a useful tip.

“And I’m not talking philosophy,” he went on, “practical stuff.”

“Remember, your men will respect you, just by virtue of your rank,” he continued, “but is that true respect?”

“No sir, ‘true’ respect needs to be earned,” I said affirmatively.

“Yes,” he said, “that comes by virtue of our knowledge, ground experience, actions and demeanor.”

“Right sir!”

“Do what you’re trained to, and let your actions do the talking,”

he said, as I took away the ball from him yet again.

“Here’s an action doing the talking coming up sir,” I said and shot a 3-pointer basket.

In the following days, I got into the daily routine. My favorite being—the morning physical training and run, evening games and the occasional firing practice for the men. Of course, there were also times (which was like almost all the time), when I was the Duty Officer and had to conduct checkups through the night.

Soon it was time for my Dining-in ceremony into the Officers Mess. Until now I had been dining with the men, and as per tradition, there was a party in the evening.

“Mishra, eat a lot of butter, a few hours before the party,” Arun sir said to me during evening games.

“Sir, you mean raw butter, straight from the packet?”

“Yes, have some chunks of butter, it will help you when you get

‘Dined-in,’ if you know what I mean,” he chuckled, winking an eye.

“Right sir, thanks for that,” I made a mental note of this.

After a quick bath, I went to the Mess kitchen and had a few chunks. Eating butter was no fun, but this was going to save my stomach from the mega cocktails with a lining. Soon it was time for the party, and all officers and their wives had gathered in the Mess.

“So Siddhant, can you see that glass getting prepared?” Maj Sunil asked.

“Yes sir,” I said, looking at two officers preparing a cocktail in a huge glass, “I guess that is for me.”

“Well yes of course,” he said with his trim mustache extending, thanks to his wide smile, “have you learnt our unit’s war cry?”

“Yes sir,” I said, that was one of the first things I had learnt,

“Veer Dravida, Kuttada Kollada.”

“Good,” Maj Sivaram said, coming in with my glass (more like a jar) of cocktail and kept it in front of me.

He also brought in a plate full of large green chilies. Maj.

Sivaram was also an Ex-NDA, that too a Foxy (from my Foxtrot Squadron).

“Siddhant, all you have to do now is—have the full glass, have a green chili and shout the war cry at the top of your voice,” Maj.

Sivaram said.

“Right sir,” I said confidently. It didn’t seem that daunting a task.

“Show your Foxy josh,” he said and then added with a genuine smile. “Do this routine—17 times.”

I was shocked and looked at other officers, hoping to hear someone say, that was a joke. The chilies in the plate were in a group of five, five, five and two, i.e. 17 in all. It turned out that the joke was on me and this was very much the tradition.

“Cheers sir,” I lifted my jar, with a smile and picked up the first chili, ready to take the plunge.

“Cheers,” they all said and thus started the drinks’ session.

“Feel free to go to the rest room as many times as you want,”

Capt. Sanjay, another relatively young officer said and sat down next to me.

“You might feel like throwing-up, and of course do throw-up. It’s fine,” he continued, remembering his time fondly, “all in good spirit.”

“Sure sir,” I said, extending to him some hot snacks kept on the table.

After an uncertain amount of time, I was through and everybody had finished dinner by then. I felt a bit dizzy and hazy, but wasn’t down and out as expected.

“Come, I’ll introduce you to the Ladies,” an officer said. I was in no position to relate the face to any name at that time.

“Let’s have a song from Lt. Mishra,” one of the Ladies said, and all others agreed readily.

I just smiled and looked at them. Within a blink of an eye, everyone was sitting and I was the sole person standing. I knew that singing wasn’t something that I needed to worry about, but standing throughout the song was.

“Ma’am, please excuse my voice, if it’s a bit hoarse,” I said to the crowd, and gave a rendition of the legendary Kishore Kumar’s golden number—“Kehna Hai .”

I remember a lot of clapping and surprised looks. The 2-i-c (second-in-command) asked the Adjutant—how the youngster could sing well after all the drinks, and was still standing on his feet. Well, I would say a fair share of credit went to the butter.

The Party got over at around 2330hrs, and dizzy but sober, I bid them farewell with a—“Good evening ma’am, Good evening sir” to each.

“Siddhant,” Arun sir said, as we walked back to our accommodation—slowly and steadily, “it’s okay to wish the ladies—‘Good night.’

”

“Oh, I know that to seniors we can’t wish ‘Good night’ because the night being ‘good’ is technically not our call,” I smirked.

“Absolutely, for all you know you might have to go somewhere middle of the night,” he said.

“So you’re saying it’s—Good night ma’am, Good evening sir?” I confirmed, opening my door.

“Spot on!”

“There is so much to learn,” I said, trying to think straight,

“Good evening sir.”

I passed out sometime after reaching my room.

A few months passed by, and the unit moved to further North East beyond Gangtok, for an operational exercise. After a few days of acclimatization, we moved to the high altitude area, at around 12,000ft-14,000ft. There were units already posted there, guarding the borders and carrying out routine tasks. The view from my cabin-cum-tent was awesome and it overlooked the famous Tsongmo (Chhangu) Lake. The scenic beauty of the rising sun and the view of the Tsongmo Lake left me stupefied every morning.

One of the days, Maj. Sunil called me to his makeshift office. It was cold and it had snowed overnight.

“Siddhant, meet Subedar Manoj in the afternoon,” he said, sifting through a letter from the Brigade HQ.

“Take a patrol out tomorrow morning, there’s a Grenadiers’ unit located here,” he said indicating towards a location on the map.

“Speak to Maj Gupta of that unit before starting the climb, and get the Sit Rep (Situation Report) from that post.”

“Right sir,” I said, “what time do I meet him?”

“Meet that officer with your patrol party by 0600hrs,” he said, still engrossed in other files.

“Right sir, good day!” I said, saluted and turned around smartly to go back.

“Siddhant,” Sunil sir called out, as I was just about to step outside. The office was warm, thanks to the heaters and I didn’t mind the additional seconds inside.

“Yes sir,” I said turning around. Finally, he looked up from the files.

“Come back in time from the patrol. In the evening tomorrow,” he continued and smiled, “come to the Mess straightaway, we’ll have your birthday party there.”

“Right sir,” I said, happy at the thought of at least some sort of celebration on my Birthday.

Next day—October 18 th , early in the morning, I reached the starting point with my men. The post was a four-hour trek further high up, near the Chinese border. The climb in the heavy gear was rough. The toughest part was the climb on a series of cuttings on a vertical stretch called—the 1001 steps. As we reached the top, there were strong-freezing winds blowing, and visibility was around 10-15 meters. In another half an hour, we reached the post.

“ Jai Hind sahab ,” an NCO in the “post” said with a smart salute, while the other three stood in attention. The chill in the air was evident from the whiff of vapor coming out as he spoke.

“ Jai Hind, Naik Sharma ,” I said, “ Aaram se, aur kaise hain aap sab ?” The first part— Aaram se was essentially a command to stand-at-ease. Other than basic questions, I really did want to know how they were coping with the weather.

“ Bahut acche hain sahab, aaj kal garmi thodi zyada hai ,” he said humorously (these days it’s a tad too hot though). We stepped inside the tent, which seemed warmer (or rather less cold).

The troops posted there, shared some of the issues they had to deal with and welcomed the mails/letters my men were carrying.

They shared plenty of jokes, and treated the patrol party with piping hot black tea and snacks. The cup of hot kaadha (black tea) in that weather was more like an elixir of life. I could only imagine how tough things would be for the Indian soldiers in places like Siachen Glacier, and looked forward to experiencing that soon. Shortly thereafter, we started our march back to the base location. At night, all officers gathered in our makeshift Officers Mess, and we had a small cake cutting and birthday party for me.

By now, there was great bonhomie between my troops, other officers of the unit and me. During the exercise and typically in all field locations, there was no Saturday/Sunday/Holiday, for obvious reasons. We used to play games in the evening, even here.

Playing Volleyball was fun, but while playing Cricket, we lost quite a few balls to the picturesque valley. In terms of connectivity, there was cell phone coverage available only at some of the points on hilltops. One of the evenings, I climbed up a hill behind my tent, to make a call at home.

“Hi Mom, how are you,” I asked, when she picked up finally. There had been irritating instances earlier when I had climbed all the way up only to realize that there was no one at home.

“Hi Siddhant, great to hear your voice,” she said, “It must be cold, right?”

“Yes Mom, this place is beautiful. From my cabin, I can see the Chhangu Lake,” I said, jumping on to another rock for getting all the bars on my

cellphone.

“I remember that lake. I had gone there with your father in the initial years,” she said reminiscing the past.

“Yeah, I remember the black and white pictures,” I said, jumping on to yet another rock.

“And mom, today in the morning I opened the door and there were clouds in my room,” I said, remembering the morning. “It was as if the clouds were knocking at the door; simply awesome.”

“That’s nice,” she said, “no problems right?”

“Oh you know how it is Mom, this and that,” I said shrugging away the question, “Nothing to worry about, Life’s good.”

“That’s my Boy,” she said happily. “Vanshika has gone out right now.”

“Sure Mom I’ll call later, I have to go now,” I said and jumped my way down the slope.

After the end of the exercise, we came down to our base. After months of scenic beauty, the pollution and non-pahadi people (

pahadi —people from the hills) was a welcome sight.

Within a week of coming back, the unit moved towards the Bhutanese border for an Operation, code-named—OP Rhino. This was part of a massive operation launched by the Royal Bhutanese Army (RBA), to flush out militant camps on their borders. I was a small part of a very big picture of course, and was responsible for one stretch of the porous border. On the afternoon of the fifth day, we got confirmed information from the local sources, on a suspected militant hideout.

It was a three-hour march from our location, into a dense jungle and across a small river. After getting orders from the CO, I asked my ambush party to get prepared.

“ Saab ,” I called out to the company JCO, “ 1800hrs ambush party yahaan se march karega .” I passed on some other instructions as well. We were going to leave in an hour.

“ Ji sahab , 1745hrs party ready hoga ,” he replied in the affirmative.

The thambi men (term used for men from the Madras regiment) were strong-willed, known for valor and loyalty flowing in the blood, and were always full of enthusiasm. At 1745hrs, my team from the ghatak platoon was ready to march. I put on some camouflage paint, picked up my weapon, gear and we moved out.

Few hours later, we had reached the spot. The sound of a flowing stream of water was the only audible sound. There were a few bags kept on the side of a tree, covered with some leaves and twigs.

We decided not to touch it, and took up strategic positions around. The forest was dense and there was hardly any light trickling in from the moon. It was now 0230hrs, and there was no noise except for the crickets, some random frogs frolicking and the stream. I was at a vantage point with two other men. One of them was a sniper.

“ Sahab , teen baje, kuch hulchul hai ,” Naik Raghu whispered (movement at three o’clock) to me.

I shifted my NVD (night vision device). There was one person moving deftly towards the spot.

“ Koi fire nahi karega ,” I whispered back (no one will fire).

He was definitely a scout and there were more to follow. The militant sat down around the bags, and took out what looked like a box of (probably) explosives. His back was towards us, and we couldn’t make out what he was doing.

Around 10 minutes went by and there was no sign of anyone else coming in. I was now mulling over whether to move in or wait.

Better sense prevailed and we stayed put. In some time, we saw three more from the group wading across the knee-length water in that area.

“ Sahab, aur admi aa raha hai ,” Naik Raghu whispered (more men are approaching), looking in the direction of my eyes.

“ Sabko aane do ,” I said (let everyone come).

The militants were walking down swiftly with their weapons over the shoulders. Soon they gathered around and started discussing something. Now was the right time to get them. Leaving the sniper and his buddy on high ground, my team was to move forward on my count of three.

What happened next was utter chaos. Their sentry (the first guy) probably saw a couple of dogs running through the bushes in another direction, and started a burst fire of AK-47. Rest of the militants also followed suit and got up to run. In the midst of all the confusion and seeing them scattering, I launched the attack. That was the beginning of a heavy exchange of fire, as they started running helter-skelter and we followed close in pursuit. I sent a small team on another route to plug in the gaps. After around three hours of cross fire, we finally gathered on their location. Two of them had escaped, leaving one injured and one dead behind, along with a lot of ammunition and other items. This was our first near-successful operation after coming to that front, with zero casualties on our side.

Rest of the time in that location passed off without significant action at my front. This was the first formal OP that the RBA had carried out at such a grand scale, and it was successful in destroying around 30 camps of various militant outfits. After the OP, we were back to our location and rest of the months went off smoothly.

Soon my attachment period of 1 year with the unit ended, and the posting orders came in. The last few days with the Battalion were those with mixed emotions. The memento I got while being “dined-out” from the Officers Mess had the slogan of the Madras Regiment inscribed on it—“ It is Glory to die doing one’s duty. ”

“Siddhant, why don’t you get ‘converted,’ and join us?” Maj.

Nandish, one of the seasoned officers of the unit asked.

He was walking me out of the office on the last day, after I finished all the paper work. I was going to board the train at night.

“I would have loved to sir,” I said, “but for now I need to join EME, my Dad’s regiment. This unit however, will always remain closest to my heart. I’ll definitely come back some other time.”

“Yeah, maybe in another capacity,” he said. “Are you going on annual leave, or joining straightaway?”

“Straightaway to Tenga Valley sir,” I said and looked ahead at the soft-top open air Maruti Gypsy. Beautiful flowers and a traditional big umbrella on top adorned the vehicle. There were two ropes tied on either side of the front of the vehicle (for pulling).

The send-off was grand, starting with my garlanding by unit officers and JCOs. After this came the ceremonial pulling of the gypsy (with me standing underneath the umbrella) by all the unit personnel, led by the unit’s band. Finally, we finished the ceremony with the unit’s war cry. My enriching tenure with the unit was now over, and I got ready to replace the Green Beret and black pom-pom (headgear of the Madras regiment), with a navy blue beret.

### An Officer And A Gentleman

The journey to Tenga Valley (in Arunachal Pradesh) from the nearest railway station was pretty green and serene. I reached the unit late in the evening. From the unit’s admin office, a road went vertically up, skirting around a hill at a steep inclination. At the top was the Officers Mess, with officers’

rooms in one line on the down slope. There was a big white board in the corner with a message in blue font—“ The Weather may be cold, but our hearts are warm, we welcome you. ” The rooms in the accommodation were

just big enough in size, and probably the best one could expect given the terrain and inclination of that land.

The next day, I met my CO, 2-i-c and other officers. There were three other youngsters in the unit, including one Lady Officer (LO). In a few months, all four of us were going to go for our YOs—“Young Officers” course. The EME corps was one of the support services of the Army. There was a lot to learn over the next few years. Over a period, the training would encompass all types of weapons and armaments, Military vehicles, tanks, computers, etc.

Around a month into the unit, the 2-i-c, Lt. Col. Bakshi called me in the morning one day, at around 1000hrs.

“Siddhant, I have a task for you,” the 2-i-c said, as I came in and sat down.

“Sure sir,” I said, thinking of what that task might be.

“One of the unit officers—Capt. Sameer Negi got married two weeks back, and is coming in the afternoon today with his wife,” he said, sipping a cup of tea.

“She has no idea about how Lady Wives are welcomed into the Army,” he continued with a naughty smile, “and Negi hasn’t given her a hint. I want you to organize her welcome.”

“Oh, that’ll be good fun sir,” I said excitedly.

“Yes, involve Lt. Anshika as well if you want,” he said.

I definitely needed her (the LO’s) help in the quick idea that had come in my mind.

“I can be creative about my plan, right sir?” I asked, grinning away.

“Feel free, make it memorable,” he said, wishing me luck.

There began the “Operation Newlywed Lady Wife.” Five minutes later, I was sitting in my office penning down a letter. This was going to be a

romantic letter from a “Ms. Suzan” to “Dearest Sam”

(Sameer sir). The letter spoke amorously about how it had been more than a month since they were last together. She was waiting desperately to meet again, and will always cherish that last evening at his place. There was nothing indecent in the letter, but many unsaid things that would make the reader mull over it.

In an hour or so, I was ready.

“Hey Anshika, Sameer sir and ma’am are coming in the afternoon today,” I said to Lt. Anshika, as she stepped into her office.

“I heard about that sir, are we planning something?” she asked, smiling a beaming smile.

“Yup, and you’ve got a role to play,” I said, sitting down to discuss.

“Wow, sure sir,” she said with a distinct glint in her eyes, and I told her the plan.

Anshika had to play the role of a Dhobin , i.e. a washerwoman who comes to all the officers’ rooms to collect clothes for washing/

ironing. I was going to play the role of Capt. Sameer’s sahayak i.e. his helper (as a soldier). I had a quick lunch and changed into a white T-shirt, OG (Olive Green) trousers and white PT

Shoes. I also got a sign-off on the plan “in principle,” from some of the senior officers.

1400hrs: Capt. Negi and ma’am arrived, after which Capt. Negi had to get down from the vehicle and meet the CO for something (supposedly) urgent. This was intentional of course, and another officer escorted ma’am in the vehicle up the road, to sir’s room.

I was waiting there patiently. The operation had begun.

“ Jai hind Memsaab ,” I said to ma’am, as she came in and the Mess staff brought in the luggage.

She looked tired from the long journey and just nodded with a brief smile. I went inside the room and started adjusting the suitcases and bags. She just sat in a chair and looked at the room, probably wondering when sir will come.

While moving some of his clothes in the cupboard to make space, a folded paper fell down suddenly. I picked it up, read a few lines with eyebrows rising rapidly, and slyly (but conspicuously) tried to hide it.

“ Woh kya hai bhaiya ?” she asked (what is that), as I pocketed the letter.

“ Kuch nahi Memsaab ,” I said (nothing madam), fumbling with words and nervous in my tone. I continued keeping the clothes as if nothing had happened, with a tensed look on the face.

She got suspicious and came forward.

“ Woh paper humko do ,” she said (give me that page), more firmly this time.

I gave her the letter reluctantly and took a step back. Within a few seconds, I saw every nerve on her face twitch and a shock wave emanating from within. For some time she didn’t speak or react, while I continued to look busy arranging the luggage.

1500hrs: In a couple of minutes, there was a knock on the door and it was Anshika. She had dressed up as a dhobin . The one concern in this prank was that I looked like a smart & handsome sahayak (at the cost of immodesty!) and Anshika was a tad too beautiful to be a dhobin . She was a Punjabi officer, and had won some college beauty contest before joining the Army. That didn’t help at all. I crossed my fingers.

“ Ye Negi sahab ke kapde le lo ,” she said (take these clothes of Capt. Negi) to me in a rustic accent, and then looked at ma’am.

“ Memsaab, Sahab ne kab se paise nahi diye kapdon ke ,” she said (he’s not paid for the clothes) in a complaining tone to ma’am.

“ Haan theek hai baad mei le lena ,” I said (take it later) to Anshika with arrogance, and took the set of ironed clothes.

“ Kitne hue ?” ma’am asked Anshika (how much), still in shock.

I was separating the bundle of ironed clothes she had brought, one by one, while ma’am gave her some money. I took out a combat trouser and shirt, formal black trouser, white T-shirt, and then—

a woman’s top and a long skirt. Again, quickly but not so swiftly, I put another shirt over it as soon as ma’am noticed it.

“ Ye kiska hai ,” she asked (whose is this) the dhobin, with an agitated tone.

“ Hamein kya maloom, 12 kapde liye the, 12 le ke ayi hu ,”

Anshika said (what do I know), maintaining an indifferent face and same accent.

“ Memsaab, sahab ki kuch dost aa ke rehti thi, unme se kisi ka hoga ,” I said hesitantly. The idea was to convey to Ma’am that he was a womanizer.

Ma’am couldn’t believe her eyes and ears. She had just received the second shock. Those clothes were actually a mix of Anshika and my own stuff.

1530hrs: Anshika had moved out and quietly slipped into her own room, which was right above this one. Ma’am asked for a chair to sit in the sun (chilly afternoon). I kept one outside her room and stood nearby for any further orders.

“ Tum sahayak jaise dikhte nahi ho ,” ma’am said (you don’t look like a helper) to me thoughtfully. Shucks! I exclaimed in my mind, probably my get up wasn’t that good. I just smiled.

“ Kahan tak paddhe ho tum ?” she asked (till where I had studied).

“ Memsaab , baarhawi tak ,” I said (till class 12 th ), after a few seconds gap. In my mind, I was saying—“ dude act a bit less sophisticated, don’t spoil it.”

“ Capt. Negi kab ayenge ?” she asked (when will he come), a bit worried now.

“ Memsaab, sahab ki kaafi dost thi, milne gaye honge shayad ,” I said, and left her with that thought of Sir flirting with his old girlfriends—right now. It was time for a break and I excused myself, stating that I’ll be working in the next room below (which was actually my own).

1700hrs:I came out of my room, and saw that ma’am had been sitting out on that chair all this while. That love letter was in her hands and she was just looking at the mountains blankly. For a moment, I wondered what she must have been thinking. There was no telephone connectivity. As a newlywed, she’d just seen traces of her brand new husband’s multiple affairs, and had no clue where he was right now.

“ Memsaab, aap chaai piyengi ,” I asked her (if she wanted some tea).

“ Nahi, thik hai ,” she said (no).

Suddenly, I saw Anshika coming out of her room in the prim evening uniform- white shirt and trouser. She saw ma’am sitting.

Not knowing what to do, she took a right turn immediately, and walked steadily towards the Mess. She was out of sight quickly.

“ Yeh to wahi dhobin hai na ?” she enquired (isn’t she the same washerwoman). Now, I wasn’t prepared for this situation at all.

“ Ji Memsaab ,” I gulped, and said the first thing that came to my mind, “ darasal, woh is room mei rehne waale sahab ko jaanti hai .” I couldn’t believe that I ended up saying—she knew the officer staying in this room. What was I implying?

Ma'am was taken aback and didn't know what to say. I didn't bother clarifying either. I just looked straight, and left the interpretation to her imagination. Thankfully, she was back with the worried expression, and a potential catastrophe was averted.

1800hrs: Another officer informed ma'am that the CO's wife will take her interview in the Officers Mess in an hour and she will have to change into combat dress (of course, there is no such thing in reality). This came in from the seniors, and not part of my original plan. We arranged for the uniform, and ma'am went for the interview after that. During the so-called interview, the First Lady of the unit asked her a couple of questions about the Army that left her stupefied. Just before she was about to break down, the truth was unfurled. Another officer then escorted ma'am back to her room, where sir was already waiting to welcome her.

2000hrs: The couple probably made up, and reached the Mess for the dinner party, where all the unit officers and ladies were waiting for them. I finally met her and introduced myself.

"Good evening ma'am," I said smiling away, "I'm Lt. Siddhant Mishra."

"Lt. Mishra, what a shock you've given me today," ma'am said, visibly pleased that this was all a setup.

"It's only that I've seen 'you' finally," she continued, "that I believe the story."

"Also, let me introduce to you the second actor," I said, and called Anshika.

"Good evening ma'am, I'm Lt. Anshika," she smiled in, "hope we didn't trouble you much."

"Oh, that's fine," she said and then nudged at Negi sir, "as long as none of it is true."

"Who wrote that love letter by the way," Maj. Lahri, another officer, came in and asked, "I've heard a lot about it."

“I’m the author, the ‘Ms. Suzan’ in question, sir,” I said humbly with a sly smile.

“Hmm, interesting writing skills, Cheers!” he said raising his glass towards me, “experience from a lot of girlfriends?”

“Zilch sir,” I said, taking a sip from my drink, “never had one, no time”

“I’ll always treasure that letter Lt. Mishra,” Mrs. Negi said and I just thanked her, blushing into a smile and we dispersed.

This was something that I too was going to remember forever. Rest of the party was as usual. I used to enjoy the drinks sessions only to an extent, was more of a teetotaler. I had learnt the art of surviving in parties with at most two glasses of Whiskey by using a napkin around the glass to hide the quantity, and at the same time pushing other officers for another peg.

There was one thing that I knew about officers’ drinking pattern in parties (from Dad’s times). Every officer knows his limits, and never drinks up to a state where he isn’t in control of himself, especially in the presence of Ladies and kids. The chivalry shown towards Officers’ wives is conspicuous and genuine. All ladies are treated with a lot of respect. So much so, that even a senior officer addresses young officers’ wives as

—Ma’am.

Few months later, it was time to leave for our “Young Officers”

course YOs-99. Officers who came from an engineering background had a different batch called YTOs (T-Technical). Out of the four youngsters in the unit, Capt. Neeraj sir & Lt. Anshika were YTOs and Lt. Harinder (aka. Harry) and I were YOs. Neeraj sir had a childish face with a dimple when he smiled, and a tinge of gray in the hairs. Harry was a vibrant Khalsa, always ready to crack jokes, and we all had some good times in the last few weeks remaining in the unit.

On the last night in Tenga valley, I was walking back from the Mess with Capt. Shetty, one of our seniors.

“Siddhant, everyone has a lot of expectations from you,” he said, opening his room.

“Yes sir, the CO said in the morning that I need to get an ‘I’ (Instructor) grading,” I said.

“Absolutely,” he said, “you Ex-NDAs always do well, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“We don’t like studying though, sir,” I said, stating the fact with a grin, and picked up an Automobile Magazine lying on his table.

“More importantly,” he smiled, “and this is a very important advice. Don’t fall in love with a local Gujju girl or an LO.”

“Oh, why would you say that sir,” I said grinning from side to side, knowing exactly what he meant.

“All these years you guys spend in NDA, then IMA, then Infantry,” he said continuing his line of reasoning, “this will be the first ‘peace’ station and believe me, Baroda has a lot of ‘greenery.’ Don’t fall in love with the first girl you meet.”

“Of course sir, will keep that in mind. Thanks for the advice,” I chuckled and left for my room.

Yes, we did miss experiencing the typical college life, but it was worth every drop of sweat. As for YOs, I was looking forward to do well and enjoy the course.

Good Times, Love & Oops!

Few days later, the batch of YOs and YTOs arrived at Baroda.

After reaching in the evening, I went to the allocated accommodation with my luggage. Our rooms were in the student officers' blocks.

“Hey Dhavan,” I said banging into the room excitedly, “we are roommates, that's great.”

“Hi Siddhant, how are you buddy, it's been ages,” Dhavan said, and we had a good hug.

Lt. Rajiv Singh Dhavan was one of the few Gentlemen Cadets from my batch (including me), who got to join EME. He was a bright bespectacled guy from Haryana, and had always been a topper. In fact, he was the ACC (Academy Cadet Captain) in our 6 th term at NDA and had an impressive personality. Back in the academy days, Dhavan was from Mike and I was from Foxtrot Squadron, even our academic sections were different. We hadn't interacted much at IMA either, save for a few occasions. However, meeting up now, after over a year, the bonhomie was conspicuous.

“We'll rock this course together,” Dhavan said.

“Yup, have you met other YOs?” I asked, looking at the furnishing in our accommodation.

“Not yet, but we're the only two Ex-NDAs. Let's go meet up others after you freshen up,” he said, as I started to unpack.

Next morning the course was ready after breakfast for the first class. Overall, in YO-99 batch, there were 12 Male Officers and 4

Lady Officers. We were all in proper Olive Green uniforms and I threw a brief look at the four LOs. At first glance, they were just junior officers and nothing more, so all was fine. Soon we boarded the staff bus and left for our first class, in the Vehicles Faculty area. In the period right after tea break, someone poked me with a pen from behind.

“Lt. Siddhant,” the instructor said, apparently the second time as I suddenly sat up straight, “what did we just discuss?”

“Sir,” I said with a long pause, “we discussed the suspension systems of a 4x4 Maruti Gypsy.”

“Okay,” he said, bemused that I actually got it right.

Dhavan was sitting next to me, and we just exchanged a quick smile. We were trained to sleep in academic classes (right from NDA days), but at the same time be awake just enough to know what was happening.

Our course then started, with PT or Officers’ Drill in the morning, and classes after breakfast onwards until evening.

Saturday was a half day. Over the initial few days, Dhavan, Lucky (a.k.a. Lt. Sunil Lakhman) and I, had become close chums. Lucky was a smart fellow—good looks, funny, and entertaining. One day a few of us were just sitting in our café after a short evening run.

“Guys, where do we go biking today?” Lucky asked with glint in his eyes.

“Let’s go to DC College, and get some eye candy,” another YO said, ordering a few soft drinks.

“Whatever, but let’s go out somewhere,” I said, looking at the time. I was all sweaty after the run, and needed a change of environment.

“Let’s do one thing,” Dhavan offered, bringing his Pepsi, and then stopped abruptly.

“Guys, don’t turn around, but look slowly to your left,” he said, and we looked towards our left, inconspicuously.

It was one of our junior LOs—Lt. Divya, in a smart body-hugging top and jeans, walking out of the gate. In one corner, we saw one of our seniors (from YTO course) waiting with his bike.

“What the hell,” Lucky said, “why’s she going out with the YTOs?”

“What has the world come to, that too with Dharam sir?” I asked jokingly, “talk about course-spirit.”

“You guys don’t even speak to the LOs, what do you expect?”

Dhavan commented.

“Sure, look who is talking,” I said, knowing him better.

It was true to an extent. We were busy in our own world, and never opened up to the LOs. Other YTOs joined them shortly, and they all went out probably for a movie as a group.

“We’ll take care of it,” I said to no one in particular. Not that it mattered. YTOs were our seniors and a different batch altogether. However, it was more about our not being inclusive with the LOs.

The next day during classes, some of us casually chatted with the LOs during tea and broke the figurative ice wall. There were four of them—Lt. Divya, Lt. Vidhi, Lt. Raveena and Lt. Sangeeta. After seeing Divya in the evening the previous day, I had started to like her. She was from the hilly region of Dehradun—a pahadi .

She was beautiful of course, had a honeyed voice, cute little dimple when she smiled, small attractive chinki eyes, and made me smile every time we spoke. However, I distinctly remembered Shetty sir’s advice and shredded away any such feelings. We all continued our routine of just hanging around in the city in the evenings, coming back to the EME School campus by 2100hrs—the upper limit, and then sort of study (well, a bit at least).

One of the following evenings, we had to go for a meeting in the Officers Mess at 1900hrs, for an upcoming Dinner Party. All YOs and YTOs had gathered, and the officer-in-charge brought out the agenda—responsibility for arrangements, songs, entertainment, etc.

“Who all are ‘singers’ amongst you?” he asked.

I rose up my hand. There were only a few other hands in the room.

“Okay, you all have five minutes to discuss and let me know what songs you’ll be singing,” he said, and went back to his checklist.

I quickly thought of a few songs, and then saw Divya signaling me with beseeching eyes to come towards her.

“What audacity,” I thought out loud, calling a senior instead of coming over (even though it was only one meter). It seems my heart took the call, and the mind couldn’t care less. I promptly went to her.

“Sir, can I sing a duet with you?” she asked earnestly in her pleasing voice.

My happiness knew no bounds, but I just smiled casually.

“Of course, do you have any song in mind?” I asked, as if I had sung thousands of duets myself.

She turned around to her roomie, Lt. Vidhi.

“Vidhi, I’m singing a song with Siddhant sir,” she said excitedly.

“Excellent,” Vidhi said and continued, “sir, you should sing with me too—maybe next time. I’m singing a solo this time.”

“Sure Vidhi,” I said, “What are you singing?”

“I’m not sure, but you two should sing,” she said after a pause,

“Chhod do aanchal by Kishore ji & Asha ji.”

“Yes, that’s a good one,” I said gladly, “we just need to get the lyrics now.”

This was perfect. It’s not that I was interested in her or something; just that this way I would get to know her better. Our daily song practices started, and we ended up spending more time together in the evenings. She had a mellifluous voice, and although she missed the rhythm at times, it didn’t really matter.

On the party night, we gave a good performance and rest of the party went well. During dinner, I heard a rumor that some of the officers came a bit late to the party. As expected, the Adjutant summoned all YOs and YTOs at the end, after all other officers and families had left.

“So I believe you all know why you’re here,” Col Ranveer the Adjutant, said sternly and looked at the entire batch from left to right. Col. Ranveer carried an authoritative aura around him, which was typical of the role of an Adjutant. As youngsters, we shuddered at the thought of him chiding us, every time such a thing happened.

“I don’t like checking on officers for coming in late. Many of you came trickling in after the Commandant had arrived, and I’ve told you before....” he continued and this lambasting went on for 5-10 minutes, while all of us just listened quietly.

“...rest everything was fine. Let’s not have this conversation again,” he concluded in a calmer tone, still having a look-that-could-kill expression on his face, “any questions?”

There was pin drop silence. Obviously, we just wanted to scoot from there.

“ Te-Na-Na-Na-Na-Na Te-Na-Na-Na ...” suddenly the mobile ring-tone of one YTO went off, playing the latest party number—“ Aaja Soniye ” from the Hindi movie “ Mujhse Shaadi Karogi .”

There was a flicker of smile in all our faces, and we looked at the Adjutant, realizing that he had just reprimanded us for indiscipline. Luckily, the same flicker was on his face too. He just rose up both his hands dramatically towards the sky, as if only God can help us, and asked us to carry on. That was that and the beautiful night was over. While dispersing I caught a glimpse

of Divya, and our eyes met for a couple of seconds. I was going to miss those practice sessions. It’s not that I was falling for her or anything; or I don’t know, so I thought.

Few days later, while going to one of the married officers' house on my bike in the evening, I saw an LO in a distance walking towards the office. She was in prim uniform at this hour.

"Must be the Duty Officer for tonight," I thought and moved on, casually looking at the rear view mirror to see who it was.

Screech! My bike came to an abrupt halt.

"Divya, 'you' are the duty officer tonight?" I asked her in astonishment, removing my helmet.

"Good evening sir, yes I'm the duty officer," she said, smiling with her super-duper cute dimple.

"Why are you walking to the office? You could have asked me," I asked, somewhat sternly but smiling, "or any one of us, to drop you."

This feeling was more of a senior informing a junior of his or her right, than anything else.

"I didn't want to bother you all sir," she said shyly.

"Anyway, come with me, I'll drop you."

"Thanks sir," she said and sat behind me.

This was the first time a girl was sitting behind me on my bike.

However, at this moment, I didn't get any such thought. As we went forward, I saw Harry (the YO from my unit) passing by on his bike from the front, giving me naughty looks. Dhavan, Lucky and Harry had already conjectured that I was falling for Divya. I knew that Harry would spill more creativity into the colorful interpretation of this scene to others.

“Thanks for the ride sir,” Divya said, after we reached the Duty Officer room.

I wanted to stay longer, but this wasn't the time or place. She was the Duty Officer and there were other soldiers in one corner, going about their tasks. A Duty Officer was essentially on-point for any untoward incidence through the night, and check on sentries on night duty (hence the combat dress).

“Do you want to go out for dinner?” my mouth blurted out, and I don't know why. Maybe deep inside I knew that she couldn't go out in combat dress, so obviously it wasn't really like “asking her out” or something.

“I already had sir,” she smiled back, straightening her uniform cap, “thanks!”

“Ok, don't say later that I didn't offer you,” I said, happy that the ball was in her court now.

“Let's go this Saturday sir,” she said, looking as sweet as ever.

“Okay, that sounds good,” I said, happy at the way things turned out and put on my helmet.

That Saturday evening, I went to Neeraj sir (the YTO from my unit).

“Sir, I need your bike for the evening,” I said, “Lucky has taken mine and isn't back yet.”

“That’s fine I’m not going anywhere, but I hope you want it for a date,” he said with a notable wink, and threw the keys in the air.

“Yes sir, absolutely,” I said, catching the keys, “as long as you don’t ask me —with whom.”

“A girl is what I hope,” he chuckled with a wide grin, “it’s just that I don’t want the 180cc efforts of my bike to get wasted.”

I reached her block for our first date at 1900hrs sharp. She however, took another 20 minutes after that. It was of course worth the wait and when I saw her, it was beyond what poetic words could convey. Finally, we left for dinner and entered a good restaurant. The dinner was splendid. I realized how happy I was when she was around. After I dropped her and came back to my room, I geared up for a rapid burst fire of questions.

“Oye Lucky,” Dhavan called out to the next room, “Siddhant is back.”

Lucky came in pushing open the door.

“What happened tell me, tell me,” saying that he grabbed a chair, and sat down with full attention.

“Nothing guys,” I said, waiving them away, “it was just a plain vanilla dinner.”

“Yeah sure, come on tell us what you both did,” Dhavan winked.

“Okay fine, we went to the restaurant, ordered food, chatted a lot,” I said, resting on another chair, “and came back to the campus after that.”

“What happened after that?” Lucky asked excitedly, hoping to hear something spicy.

“I dropped her back, what else?” I said, banging a paper on his head, “what were you thinking?”

“Tell me this,” Dhavan said, suddenly noticing something on his table, “where’s the ‘Veer Zara’ audio CD I bought last Sunday?”

“Veer Zara” was the name of a recently released 100% pure hard-core romantic Bollywood movie with some magical songs.

“Oh, thing is,” I said with a deliberate pause, moving towards the door slowly, “I gave it to Divya.”

The moment I said the “D” word, I shot out of the room and ran at full speed.

“Catch that head-over-heels-in-love boy,” Dhavan exclaimed as he and Lucky followed, close in pursuit. Finally, after a lot of chasing around the blocks, they caught up with me near the cafeteria and we dropped down on the chairs.

“You gave away your notes, gave away an album of romantic songs which by the way, didn’t even belong to you. You’re a goner man,”

Lucky said, patting my shoulder.

“Come on, it’s nothing,” I said, “she asked so sweetly—‘sir, do you have the Veer Zara songs?’ I didn’t have a choice.”

“Oh, is that so?” Dhavan asked with a probing look, and a suspicious smile.

“Ok fine, she just mentioned that she loved those songs,” I said, admitting proudly, “and I said that I have the album, happy?”

“I told you, he’s a gone case,” Lucky concluded. I just smiled, enjoying the moment I was in; not knowing where this was going to go. We went back after a while.

I had a little chat with Dhavan before dozing off to sleep.

“I don’t know the right answer to the love marriage vs. arranged marriage debate,” he said as I switched off the lights, “maybe it just depends.”

“Yeah, risk in both cases, and a level of surety in both,” I said, looking at the ceiling fan.

“So you think you’re a gone case yet?” Dhavan asked.

“I don’t know buddy, she’s so sweet, I enjoy every moment spent with her. It’s too early.”

“Yeah it is too early, but have you thought about what if things click?” he asked.

“Yeah, she’s a pahadi, her parents are probably orthodox, and mightn’t agree,” I continued, “I feel my Mom will agree.”

“That’s good, I’m also pretty ‘traditional,’ will marry a girl only if Mom and Dad agree,” he said.

“Yeah, that’s how it is with most of us I guess,” I concurred.

“I can already imagine,” Dhavan said, breaking into a laugh,

“sweet little kids with ‘chinki’ eyes calling me—Dhavan uncle.”

“Very funny,” I said banging a pillow on his head, “she’s just a good friend, let’s sleep now.”

“Yeah, we’ve got a 5km run in the morning,” he said and we signed off for the night.

Life was at an exquisite turning point. Those moments in the classes or evening games, when we caught each other’s eyes and looked away immediately (as if that wasn’t intentional), were precious. In the course outings, it was like an unsaid rule

—“she’s my gal,” so will sit behind me on the bike. Of course, she sat as a junior would, always maintaining the distance between us. Many days, we used to go out for long bike rides in the evenings—JLT. It was just the fact that we were spending time together that mattered.

A couple of weeks later, it was time for my birthday—October 18

th . We all gathered near the café in the evening after classes.

It was Navratri time, i.e. the Dandiya season ( Dandiya —a Gujarati folk dance). Everybody dressed up in vibrant colors; ready to go for Dandiya dance with sticks in hand, right after the dinner. After the cake cutting (in which Divya was providentially late for some reason), we started moving towards our bikes for dinner.

“You missed the cake cutting,” I said to her, putting on my helmet, as she sat behind.

“So sorry sir, I was getting ready,” she said, curving her eyebrows and making a can’t-get-angry-on expression.

“Yeah, I understand,” I said breaking into a grin, remembering every time that I had to wait and keep calling her, while she got ready for the outings.

She was dressed up in blue and looked more gorgeous than ever today. That did quite make up for the missing-in-action part.

Twenty minutes later, the course had reached the hotel. Divya and I were the last to arrive. One of our South Indian course-mates was standing in the lobby.

“Hi B’day boy, we were waiting for you,” he said in his typical South Indian accent.

“Hi Mrs. Mish...uh...Ma’am...uh...Divya, you’re most welcome,” he said teasingly to her.

“Sir, why are you saying that,” she said bashfully. I gave him a cut-it-out smile, and we all went upstairs. After dinner, all other YOs left for the Dandiya dance.

“You don’t want to go for the dance, do you?” I asked her as we came out. At least tonight, I wanted to be with her, even if that meant just another long drive and back.

“No sir, can we go for a ride?” she asked expectantly, moving away a flick of hair behind her ears.

“Yup, great idea,” I said, and we went towards the bike.

I was definitely in love with her, and facing a dilemma now. All said and done, I was a senior and didn’t want to pass on the wrong vibes. Although many intangible flames had flown across from either sides, I guess both of us were happy with the status quo. The risk of losing what we had right now, probably outweighed any other situation, or so I thought.

“Today, I will also drive sir,” she said, as we came on to a smooth stretch on the highway.

“Sure, maybe on the way back,” I said. She had told me earlier that one of her brothers had taught her driving, but I was sure that some college boyfriend must have been the one. Not that it mattered anyway; but I wished for the former to be true. We had a smooth beautiful ride along the highway and there weren’t many vehicles plying on the road. After taking a U-turn, I stopped at one corner of the road to exchange places. As we got down from the bike and I removed my helmet, our eyes met. The road was empty and quiet. Our eyes met and just didn’t let go. We came closer and stood still. Chilly winds were browsing through the moonlit night; there was not a soul in sight. Sparks were flying, and our hearts were thumping hard, as we drew closer and were two inches apart.

“I like you,” she said with a lot of intensity in her eyes.

Before she finished saying that and before I could reply, our lips met and the moment froze in a passionate kiss. It was as if our feelings were brimming up deep inside, and were awaiting this inflection point. It was the melting of two hearts, the touch of life, the redolence of aromatic flowers, and the dance of jive.

This was the “Moment of Truth.” The moment captured in time and space. The whole world had come to a standstill, seconds flowing at a slow pace.

However, there was a timeline to meet before the gates closed.

“We’re getting late, let’s go back,” I said, smiling my widest smile ever, “finally we said it. This would be my most memorable birthday.”

“Finally we did,” she said sweetly.

“Well, that changes our dynamics,” I said, as we sat on the bike.

“Yes,” she said cheerfully and put her arms around my waist as we started, “Siddhant!”

“Hmm...” I hummed, noticing the quick transition from sir to first name basis, and of course the feel of her hands.

After coming back, I told Dhavan about the change of status, and she on her side conveyed it to Vidhi and other LOs. Of course, we all know how a guy tells another guy about such things, and how a girl conveys that in a dramatically different way to other girls.

Anyway, that was that, we were now unofficially a couple.

Sometime over the next few days, “Love you” replaced the “Like you” part with a bouquet of red flowers and a big card from me.

Things had changed now. No one raised an eyebrow when we sat together in the staff bus (to the classes). The teasing from Lucky, Dhavan and others never stopped of course. If this had been a Bollywood movie, this is when we would have sung a nice romantic duet. Every time our eyes met during the classes, the entire room used to blur and it was only her and I. News of this genre travels fast and close (if not the same) to the speed of light. We definitely enjoyed the “you-are-a-couple” kind of jokes, even from a few instructors at times. Life was beautiful.

Soon it was time for a five-day term break and I left for home.

In the evening of the day I reached, we had a get together and all my cousins were around.

“Bhaiya, can you come here please?” Vanshika said, browsing through my YOs photo album.

I’d taken a printout of the photos just before leaving. I went into the room and saw Vanshika, and my other cousin sisters (younger)—Sakshi, and

Trisha sitting as a gang, and looking at a photo with particular interest.

“Who’s this girl bhaiya ,” Sakshi asked inquisitively, pointing at Divya in a red top.

The photo was that of a resort. We all had gone out for an evening outing with our instructors after the end of first out of the three Faculties. In the photo, we were all freshly out of the

pool (wet hair, dress). I had one of my arms around Harry and the other around Divya.

“Oh come on, she’s a junior Lady Officer,” I tried to smile my way out of the room, “she wasn’t fitting in the camera view actually.”

“Hold on bhaiya ,” Trisha said happily noticing another fact,

“she’s next to you in almost every photo of yours, look at this and this and this.”

“What’s up bhaiya ,” Vanshika said, “care to share?”

“That’s just a coincidence,” I said, “I’m happy and single.”

“But now, not ready to ‘mingle’ are you?” Sakshi said with a wink. My hesitation in replying probably gave me away.

“Mom, look at this,” saying that, Vanshika took the album to a wider audience. It wasn’t yet time for me to announce about us to Mom or Vanshika, and I just said that she’s a good friend. It was a great feeling though, to think of where this relationship could go. Mom of course came down to—where she belongs, how many people are there in the family, etc. I deferred that question indefinitely, with a “don’t-need-to-know-for-now” answer.

Four days later, we were back to Baroda and our course resumed.

Now that we were a couple, many other realities dawned upon us.

There were now expectations, fighting, arguments and making-up, being possessive, going the extra mile and what not. We had near similar likes and dislikes at a high level. To one of my questions on her interests in music in the initial days, she had answered that she liked many English songs too. I knew now that that was only to align more with me, the way probably I aligned with her in other ways. One of the evenings, a day before an exam, I was studying in my room.

“Sid, give me your notes at night,” Lucky said, as he came inside the room with Dhavan.

“What happened to your notes?” I asked, knowing the answer already.

“Oh, you know me, why should I make notes,” Lucky said happily,

“when you’re already making them.”

“Very funny, I don’t know how you guys decipher my writing,” I said getting up to take out the register. I used to make good notes, a habit developed in the Academy days during Tactics and Strategy classes. We used to write key points in tiny notepads that could fit easily in our combat dress. My handwriting was small, and difficult to read. Nevertheless, before exams my notes

used to travel across various rooms here, at times even blocks (other buildings).

“And this time, I won’t let it go to the LOs’ block,” Lucky warned, remembering an earlier time when I was still single.

At around 2330hrs, I was having a lovey-dovey talk with her.

“You remember the night when I was the Duty Officer and you gave me a ride?” Divya asked.

“Yeah, that was the first time any girl sat on my bike,” I said thoughtfully.

“I believe you,” she said and continued with notable blush in her tone. “That night I was like—‘Oh my gosh! Did Siddhant sir just ask me out?’ I

told Vidhi immediately after you left.”

“It was meant to be,” I said, remembering that moment. Our blocks were in a square fashion and mine was directly opposite the LOs’

block. From my ground floor balcony that opened on the inside of the square, I could see Divya standing on her first floor balcony 100 meters away (in spite of the plethora of trees in between our line-of-sight).

“Yeah—my being the Duty Officer that night, your happening to be there at that very moment, our fixing up a date.”

After a while, we got back to studying. She called again, after an hour.

“So you can solve my doubt?” Divya asked, continuing on a topic for the exam.

“Yeah, but I’ll have to draw and show it to you,” I said, which was factually true.

“Why don’t you come over?” she asked jokingly, knowing that any male officer visiting LOs’ block at night, was strongly discouraged.

“Okay,” I said straightaway.

“What do you mean by ‘okay,’ ” she asked, a bit startled.

“Okay, I’ll come over,” I said, looking at her balcony.

“Yeah sure, wishful thinking,” she said and laughed away the thought.

“Don’t challenge me love,” I said, and my mind already started chalking out a strategy.

“You couldn’t, even if you wanted to,” she said assuredly.

“Anyway, let me call you in sometime,” I said, and we dropped the call. I went into the bedroom and took out my combat dress.

“Where to,” Dhavan asked, getting up from his chair as I started changing.

“I’m going to meet her, right now,” I said excitedly, putting on my boots and uniform.

“In the middle of the night? You’re crazy, no wait,” he said with a pause and a pat on my head, “You’re in love.”

“I don’t intend to get caught buddy,” I said putting on the cap.

“Just wake me up when you’re back,” he smiled, going to bed,

“I’ll take a short nap meanwhile.”

I stepped out of the rear balcony to inside of the square block.

It was around 0045hrs. I did a quick scan of the territory. There were yellow streetlights (with dim light) around each corner of the square. I moved stealthily, using all the camouflage and concealment tactics. I became a part of the darkness, and did shadow walking using the ground features to my advantage (thanks to all the training). After reaching the block, adjoining her block, I gauged the area in between the corners. There were two sentries probably 20-30 meters away and a patch of light in between. I stood still, and timed their movements. This was both risky and exciting. With a perfect timing and swift motion, I crossed the patch successfully and called her.

“Come out to the balcony,” I said to her.

“Yeah, I was about to call you,” she said, starting to say something when I interrupted her.

“Look down Divya,” I said. She looked down, and there was shock and excitement.

“Whoa, you’re standing here, I can’t believe it,” she whispered from above, “Now what?”

“Bring two bed-sheets from inside,” I said looking up at her, and then saw her roomy, “Hi Vidhi!”

“Sir, you’re welcome to our humble abode,” she waved and said.

Divya came out and tied up the bed-sheets to the balcony grill.

The rest was all academy training and I performed a perfect “2nd class” rope climb (using hands only, legs perpendicular to ground). Twelve perfect grips and I had reached the top. I did solve her doubt, *inter alia*, and this experience was a paradigm of where the journey was as important as the destination. Nothing else happened of course save a good night kiss, and I was back in my room by 0300hrs.

22nd December 2004, 1300hrs A few weeks later, we got news that the Government had passed a commission report that benefitted the YTO batch (our seniors).

There was a lot of excitement in the Mess during lunch, and all YTOs invited the YOs for a treat at night.

“What’s the location?” I asked Dhavan, who had just come back from lunch.

“We’re going to a restaurant in the outskirts, on Waghdia road.”

“Okay, out of the campus means no ‘drinks’ I guess,” I said.

“Yeah, thanks to Gujarat being a ‘dry’ state,” he said, “both of us don’t booze much, so it’s fine anyway.”

“We’ve got the permission for Lights-out extension right?”

“Yeah, Vijay sir said that he spoke to the Adjutant and our in-time is 2359hrs,” he said.

In the evening, we had a friendly “Instructors vs. student officers” volleyball match. We were all in whites—white T-shirt and white-

trouser/shorts. It was a splendid sight. After the end of the match (which we won), I met Divya.

“You’ll be ready by 1845hrs, right?” I asked her, as she separated from other LOs.

“Actually, I wanted to speak to you about it,” she said, “I’m not feeling well.”

“Oh, what happened” I said empathetically.

“Nothing happened, I just don’t feel like going,” she said, looking a bit down.

“Oh,” I said and made a sad face, “if you don’t go, I’ll also stay back and take care of you.”

“I wonder if YTOs will feel bad if we don’t go,” I said continuing, hoping that this line of reasoning will trigger some change. The outing would have at least boosted up her mood, if nothing else.

“Okay I’ll go, since you definitely need to go,” she said finally, and then added with a wink, “and also to keep an eye on you, during the dance.”

“Awesome, who else other than thou my love,” I said happily.

“I’ll call you after reaching your place, hopefully by the end of twentieth call you’ll be ready, as usual.”

“You wish,” Divya chuckled, while she probably started thinking of what to wear.

Both the courses reached almost around the same time, and the party started with full flow.

“If only we had drinks, this would have been great,” Harry said.

“Yeah, never mind sir, the DJ is about to start,” Divya said, and grabbed her juice glass.

“Waiting for that,” he smiled, having another sip from his soft drink, “where’s Lucky?”

“He’s the Duty Officer tonight,” I grinned back, “he was cursing the Government for choosing today of all the days for the announcement.”

“No wonder, hah hah,” Harry chuckled, as we stepped on to the dance floor.

22 nd December 2004, 2300hrs

Towards the end, all YOs started leaving one by one.

“It’s so cold tonight,” Divya said, draping a shawl around her jacket and rubbing her palms.

“The helmet will keep away the cold,” I said, wearing my gloves and passing on her helmet, “so you wouldn’t have to crib about wearing it tonight.”

We took off and were one of the last YO pairs to leave. It was definitely cold, so I drove leisurely. Divya had closed her eyes, and rested her head on my back. It was a great feeling. I was doing well in the course, had fallen in love, and everything was fine back at home as well.

Life was just perfect.

Bam!

There was a loud shattering noise and things went hush.

“Life was groovy, it was fun; it couldn’t change in a jiffy, It dawned upon me that Life is a Sine Curve, and it is nothing but iffy.”

Sh\*T Happens

“Siddhant,” Divya cried loudly. She was lying on one side of the road. Something had come out of nowhere and banged into our bike.

“Siddhant,” she shouted again, looking at the stationery body on the other side of the road with the bike lying on one side. There was no movement whatsoever.

Divya tried to move her right leg, with great pain. She took out her cell phone, which was luckily still in the upper pocket of the jeans trouser. The screen had a crack. She just tried dialing the last dialed number, whichever it was.

“Yes Divya, tell me” Sangeeta’s voice said cheerfully from the other end. She had left a bit earlier along with Govind, and they were driving.

“Sangeeta, we had an accident, Siddhant is lying in a corner and isn’t moving,” Divya said breaking into tears.

“We’re coming Divya, don’t worry,” Sangeeta said and she passed on the message to Govind. On the way back, she made a couple of calls and all YOs en route made a U-turn to rush to the spot.

Meanwhile, a person who was in the vicinity and saw the accident from far, rushed to the spot too.

“Can you please check if he’s alright,” Divya asked, as he helped her move to a corner.

Shortly, many YOs arrived at the spot.

“Hold his right hand firmly,” Dhavan said to Harry, “the shoulder is injured I think.”

“Look at his helmet,” Amol said lifting up the visor, “his nose is in a bad shape.”

Divya was in pain and had fractured her right knee. She waited in a corner with some officers.

“He’s losing a lot of blood, we need to move him immediately,”

Harry said, trying to stop the blood flow with the jacket.

“Stop, Stop!” Amol waived his hand at an empty car coming from the other side.

Fortunately, the car owner was a good-hearted soul. The moment they told him that we were all student officers from EME School he readily agreed to help.

“Lucky,” Dhavan said on the phone, “Siddhant & Divya had a serious accident, inform the Adjutant.”

Another chain of phone calls followed through as the information passed forward. Everyone rushed straightaway to a civil hospital (since the Military Hospital in the city was small). Fortunately, few of the top city surgeons were on high alert because of an impending President’s visit to the city.

“He has stopped breathing,” Vinay said aloud, as the lift went up to the Operation Theater.

“Let’s hurry, make way, make way,” someone shouted frantically as the lift opened.

Everyone rushed to the ICU, where the surgeons had already arrived and they brought the body back to life.

“Ask his family to come immediately, he has lost a lot of blood,” one of the surgeons said to the Adjutant.

“Dhavan, call up Siddhant’s home and ask them to come as soon as possible, he’s very serious” Col. Ranveer said. “Raveena, call up Divya’s home and inform them as well.”

“Please arrange for 15-18 units of B+ve blood group,” another doctor announced.

Dhavan picked up the cell phone, took a deep breath and dialed from the call logs. The phone kept ringing but no one was picking up. It was 0200hrs in the morning. Dhavan kept on trying.

Finally, Mom picked the call on the twentieth try, with the intention of scolding the person that had been (seemingly) making blank calls to Vanshika for the last few days.

“Hello,” Mom said in a stern but sleepy voice.

“Aunty this is Lt. Dhavan, Siddhant’s course-mate. He had a small accident,” he said, toning down the impact. Mom was shell-shocked and didn’t know what to say.

“Aunty, please don’t worry, we are here to take care of him, and it’s not very serious,” he said calmly. “Please take the next train and come as soon as you can.”

“Okay Lt. Dhavan,” she said, still shaken and went back to the bedroom to think of the next steps.

In the Operation Theater, things got serious.

“His right shoulder is badly ruptured because of the impact, all the bones are shattered,” the Surgeon announced. “We need to amputate his right arm —through shoulder and close the wound immediately.”

This came as a shock, since no one had thought that it’s that bad.

“What does right arm—through shoulder mean,” someone asked at a low voice.

“It means what it is, the entire right arm including the shoulder. We need to do this to save his life. Who will give the consent in absence of his parents?” he asked looking at

the senior officers.

“I will,” the Adjutant stepped forward, and took the consent form.

It wasn’t a choice at all, they had to do what they had to do.

“How bad is he,” Lucky asked Dhavan. Until now, he was busy arranging for blood, while many service personnel from EME School turned up for blood donation.

“Pretty bad, they have to amputate the entire right shoulder to stop the blood loss. There are other multiple injuries, but not as grave as this one.”

“Sh\*t, any idea what happened?” he asked.

“No, I spoke to Divya, but it seems her eyes were closed,” Dhavan said, “She has no idea.”

“I just met her,” Lucky said, “I still can’t believe it. I know they wouldn’t have been driving fast.”

“Yeah, they weren’t. There was one eyewitness--a hotel cook.

He’ll come here tomorrow. The vehicle was a tractor-trailer, and the driver ran away.”

The atmosphere was tense while the operation continued, and all officers waited outside, praying hard. At that point, nothing mattered except saving life. It was early in the morning when a surgeon came out and announced the success of the operation.

There was no head injury, but because of heavy blood loss, there were high chances of brain damage. He said that it might take several days before the body becomes conscious. All officers dispersed thereafter. There was sorrow for the loss, but a tinge of happiness for the life saved.

Dhavan and Lucky stayed back as there were a couple of other operations scheduled in the next few hours. At around 0730hrs, Dhavan was looking out of the window while Lucky was reading the newspaper in the room. The nurse had just stepped out for some time.

“Hopefully Aunty will arrive tonight, I don’t know how we’ll tell her about this,” Dhavan said.

“She must be in a shock, at least Siddhant is...” Lucky stopped mid-way, and shouted, “Sister!”

Dhavan turned around and saw that the heart rate monitor was showing a straight line.

“Doctor,” they shouted and rushed towards the emergency bell.

A nurse came in, again shouted the “Doctor” word and brought ahead the Defibrillator. In about a minute or so, the heart decided to start and the body was alive once again.

“Phew,” Dhavan said, as the monitor started beeping in a rhythmic pattern.

“We’ll take the patient for the next operation in 30 minutes,”

the nurse said as she went out.

Meanwhile, back at home, Mom had informed her youngest brother who was a doctor, and other close relatives. Uncle arranged for the train tickets and all three of them left for Baroda immediately. Throughout the journey, uncle kept getting updates from Doctors and told Mom that everything is under control.

Dhavan and Raveena went to pick them up in a staff car, and took them straightaway to the hospital. On the way, he explained to Mom about the surgery, so that it doesn’t come out as a shock.

When they reached the room, everyone rose up. Mom looked at her son lying down on the bed with closed eyes. Most of the body was in bandages —the head, nose, neck, chest, stomach and both legs.

She did not lose her composure. However, Vanshika couldn’t control her emotions at that sight and broke down into tears.

Yes, she was very strong mentally, but just a few weeks back she had met her brother—hale and hearty. Uncle went and spoke to the doctors and got some more details and went through the medical files.

“Siddhant is much better now, on his way to recovery,” he said, after others had left.

“I’m happy that my son is alive,” Mom said, bringing a smile on her face, “could have been worse.”

“But why did this happen to bhaiya ,” Vanshika said sadly, “when will he open his eyes?”

“Everything will be all right Vanshika,” Mom said, putting an arm around her, “it only means that Siddhant will now drive a four wheeler, instead of a two-wheeler. From now on every task for him will be a “ baaiyen-haath-khel ” (“a game for the left hand”—

an adage in Hindi meaning something easy to do).”

“Absolutely, he’s our brave boy” uncle said, “he’ll be up in no time.”

A rotation system was set up with all YOs and YTOs, so that at any point of time at least two officers were there. Divya was still in the Military Hospital and doctors plastered up her leg, after dressing up the minor injuries on the forehead. The Tsunami had struck the Indian Ocean few days before New Year, and there

were 240,000 casualties across the countries. There was crisis everywhere.

Ten days had passed since the accident, and I had still not gained full consciousness. Finally, I woke up for good. I opened my eyes to a blurry vision of a flurry of tube-lights. There was a commotion with nurses moving around. I was lying on a hospital bed, and in a corner, I saw Mom and Vanshika. What day was this?

Where was I? What had happened?

“Siddhant, how are you?” one of my other maternal uncles came up and asked with a smile, “where are you?”

“I’m totally fine,” I said puzzled, barely able to speak and unsure of my response, “I’m in a hospital, maybe in Jabalpur. I must be having fever or

something.” I then saw some YOs, and got confused.

“Can you please remove this mosquito or something that’s biting me on my right hand?” I requested him. I wasn’t still fully conscious enough to think, why I couldn’t do it myself.

“Siddhant, you had a bike accident on Dec 22 nd ,” a doctor came up and said to me. “It was a serious accident and to save your life we had to amputate your right arm.”

“Whoops...,” I said, and looked down at the rest of me for a quick status check.

My legs were in plaster but I could feel them. The rest of me was in bandages and the doctors had wired up my jaw (with plenty of missing teeth). However, I could smile, hear and see everyone. I thought to myself —“ all in, all intact ,” and realized that everyone around was looking at me attentively. I was thirsty, and said the first thing that came to my mind.

“Hmm... can I have a chocolate milkshake?”

That was that, the pin drop silence was broken and everyone opened up into smiles (probably delighted with my reaction).

That’s the way Army teaches one to live—Life goes on. I really was thirsty anyway.

“Siddhant,” Mom said with wet eyes, and bent forward to kiss on my forehead. Vanshika held my left hand close to her heart.

“When did you all come, where are you staying?” I said with half open eyes and barely able to talk. I guess I dozed off before hearing the answer. When I woke up next, it was evening of the next day.

“Aunty, Siddhant has woken up,” Dhavan said getting up from the chair.

“Hi buddy, long time,” I said, looking around the room. There were many bouquets on one side, and get-well-soon cards hanging on a wire. “What date/time is it?”

“Good to have you back,” he said, “Today is 4 th Jan, 2100hrs.”

“What happened, will someone tell me?” I asked, trying to look for any injuries in my left hand.

“Yup, have this chocolate-shake first,” he said, bringing the chocolate-shake in a packet.

“I’ve heard that this is your favorite shake,” Mom said, pouring it into a glass.

“Anything to do with chocolate Mom,” I said.

“And I’ve also heard about Divya,” Mom said teasingly, as I took a sip from the straw.

“Oh you have? She’s just a good friend,” I said smiling a wide smile, and then realized my state.

“Don’t make me smile,” I continued, pulling my cheek back into a normal expression.

“Oh, the inner part of the cheek gets stuck on the wires?” Mom asked, looking at me worriedly.

The mouth had been wired shut because of a fracture in the jaw.

The only rays of hope (for the straw to go in) were the holes made by the missing teeth.

“Yeah, bit cumbersome, but I can’t stop smiling, can I?” I smiled and pulled my cheek back again.

“Now, what do you remember,” Dhavan asked.

“I remember me and Divya taking off,” I said taking a sip, and stopped midway, “how is she?”

“She’s fine, just had a fracture in the right knee,” Dhavan said,

“what else?”

“It was pretty cold, and,” I said thinking hard, “and that’s it, then I woke up yesterday, or today, not sure.”

“Okay,” Dhavan said and sat down, “there was an eye witness—a cook, who saw it from afar.”

“While he was returning from his hotel, he saw your bike pass by.

Then he saw a tractor-trolley coming from the front, come on to the wrong side. The driver appeared drunk, and was on a zigzag.

At the last moment, you went further left and negotiated the engine, but couldn’t save yourself from the trolley that was trailing behind in the dark. It was a head-on collision.”

“My God,” I exclaimed, “that sounds calamitous.”

“The trolley part didn’t have the side-lights, so you probably couldn’t see it in the darkness,” Dhavan said, “saved from the tractor but hit by the trailer.”

“That must’ve been messy,” I said, “and painful, was I conscious when you all came?”

“No,” Lucky came in with some snacks, and said, “The mind has an amazing way of conking off probably when the pain becomes unbearable.”

“Since when have you started speaking so much sense,” I chuckled,  
“what’s wrong with you?”

“Very funny, we somehow arranged for all the blood overnight,”

Lucky continued, “you were given 19 units of blood.”

“Gosh,” I exclaimed with eyes wide open, trying to imagine how things must have been that night.

“Everyone helped in any way they could Siddhant,” Mom said,

“Prayers and blessings came from everywhere, places far away.

It’s their concerted efforts that things are much better today.”

“So much happened, while I was gone,” I sighed and kept my empty glass aside. After a while, Mom & Vanshika left for the day to the Officers Mess.

“Aunty and Vanshika are very strong Siddhant,” Dhavan said, “I admire their courage and the way they can smile in spite of adverse circumstances.”

“That’s true, Mom is my role model and Vanshika has seen a lot very early in her life,” I said and thought about how hard it must have been for them, from the moment they got the call that night.

“Okay, so what’s the damage report on me,” I asked them.

“Not much,” Dhavan said, “no head injury, small surgery on your nose, jaw is fractured and wired up. You’ve lost 9-10 teeth, the neck is sprained, right collarbone and shoulder was shattered so had to be amputated and sealed off. Then, the stomach was opened up to check for any damage to internal organs...”

“Hold on,” I said, “so they cut open my six pack abs JLT?”

“Hah Hah, four packs maybe. It will all come back,” Lucky chuckled, “other than that, right feet is fractured, and left one is sprained. That’s about it.”

“Okay, not much,” I said, moving on, “your shift gets over at 2300hrs?”

“Yeah, Amol & Vinay will come in next,” Dhavan said, “so Siddhant what are your thoughts about Divya.”

“She should move on,” I said, looking ahead aimlessly.

I knew that she loved me, but didn’t want her to continue this relationship out of sympathy. I was internally way too strong for that.

“Yeah, I don’t expect her to carry this forward,” Dhavan shared, “move on, that’s for the best.”

“It seems I used to say some things off and on, in those 10 odd days,” I said, remembering someone telling me, and smiled. “Did I take her name in front of Mom?”

“You never said anything censorable, this is what we can say,” Lucky said with a wink, “don’t worry.”

“By the way,” Dhavan jettled in, “you died twice on that night,”

“Yeah, I heard about that I think,” I said, “quite a story I’ll have, to tell my kids about.”

“Speaking about ‘having’ kids, is everything fine on that front?”

Lucky asked with a frivolous grin.

“Buzz off; I’m totally fine,” I said throwing an empty medicine box at him, “and don’t make me smile.”

I pulled my cheeks back into place, and wondered when the wires would come off. Many relatives—near and distant had come to visit over the last two weeks. Many instructors’ and senior officers’

wives and families used to come with juice, soup, eatables on a daily basis. I felt proud of the strong bond that comes up from within, in the Army fraternity. It meant a lot to me that they were taking care of Mom & Vanshika.

On New Year’s Day earlier, Maj Avinash from my Madras regiment had called up Mom to wish her and get my number, and she gave him the update. It was not a news anyone would like to hear or imagine for someone known, but then again, that’s life.

Over the next 1-2 days, I moved on from lying position to sitting on a wheelchair. Vanshika used to cut and push small pieces of chocolate through the small gaps in my wired mouth, which was awesome. Things were getting better.

“Siddhant, let’s give you a shave,” Dhavan said one afternoon, bringing up the items.

“Let it be, maybe after a few days,” I said wearingly, waking up from sleep.

“Divya is coming to meet you in a few hours,” Lucky said smiling mischievously, “want a shave?”

“Yes please,” I said, managing a sly grin, “if you insist.”

“Still a gone case,” Dhavan said, and took out the shaving stuff.

Two hours later, I heard Divya speak to Mom & Vanshika outside the room. She was on crutches, limping with a plaster on the right leg. She looked like an angel, as gorgeous as ever, with a small injury over the right eyebrow. I couldn’t believe that in the last three-four days I had decided to bury all the feelings I had for her. An officer (unknown to me) was accompanying her. He went out after leaving her, and I wondered if he was just a friend, or something more. It didn’t matter now anyway.

“Hi Siddhant,” her lips moved and I heard the sweet voice finally. She sat down on a stool close by, and kept her plastered right leg over another stool.

“Hi Divya, how’s your knee now?” I said, looking into her eyes.

She asked someone to move her chair closer to the bed since I couldn’t move my neck around much.

“It’s just fine,” she said and picked up my left palm, “you must be wondering why I didn’t call.”

“Mrs. Mishra, let’s give them some time and space,” said one of the Ladies who had come to meet me, and everyone moved outside.

We just gave an affirmative smile. It was just the two of us now.

“All these days no one told me what had happened to you. I couldn’t call you either,” she complained with teary eyes, and kept her hand over the bandaged area on my right side. “Only yesterday evening I came to know that you’re conscious now.”

We talked about the happenings in the last few days, and we-were-so-happy-why-us part. In my mind, I had decided that this is where it should end, and it is probably for the best. She told me nevertheless, that the unknown officer was just a friend from her academy days who had come for a temporary duty.

“You’re leaving for Pune MH tomorrow?” she asked.

“Yes, that hospital specializes in artificial limbs,” I said, kind of sad at the thought of leaving that place. I wanted to continue the course, continue on what we had, and wanted life to be the same. However, the Titanic had hit the iceberg, the done couldn’t be changed now.

“I’ll be transferred to my home town—Dehradun MH till I recover,”

she said in despair.

“Maybe we’ll come back for YOs together, in the next batch,” I said, trying to cheer her up. I was feeling awkward—not being at my best in front of her, and in this condition. I was not even able to speak properly with a wired up mouth.

“I don’t know how or when we meet next, but I know one thing,”

she said with tears in her eyes. “That is—we will meet soon. I love you and I want to spend my life with you.”

She bent forward and planted a kiss on my broken lips. That touch was the kiss of life, and answered all questions of uncertainty in my mind. I now knew that we were in this for good. We exchanged our home phone numbers and she gave me a small “Goddess Durga” idol. The next day,

Mom, Vanshika, two medical attendants and I left for Pune. I still kept my guards up emotionally though, and prepared mentally for a scenario where we do not talk ever again.

### Sh\*T Happens, Life Goes On

We reached the Command Hospital in Pune, and Mom and Vanshika were staying in a Guest Room for a few days. The next day after the morning round by doctors, one of my elder cousin brothers Rohan who was working in the same city, came to meet me.

“You look much better now Siddhant,” he said cheerfully, “just a few months more.”

“Thanks bro,” I said, picking up a small mirror, “the day these wires come out of my mouth I want to bite into a good dish of chicken.”

“Of course, all in good time, by the way here’s your SIM card,”

he said putting it into my cell phone. After a while, I called up Divya and we established communication in our new bases.

“I thought you’ll never call,” she said, sounding a bit sad, “why are you so far away.”

“Why are you so far away,” I interjected with a smile, “at least we’ll be able to talk more often now.”

“We’ll talk at least thrice a day, but the STD calls are so costly,” she said thoughtfully. Those days STD call rates were high. “I’ll give you a missed call, whenever I think about you.”

“That’s sweet, I’ll do the same,” I said, looking at another officer getting an injection in the arm.

“But how will I know that it’s not just a ‘missed call’ and I should pick up?” she asked, as if it was my idea in the first place.

“Hmm,” I thought for a moment, and continued, “If there’s one short call with 2 rings and then a long ring comes, it means that the call should be picked up.”

“And if it’s only one long ring, then it’s a missed call,” she said, liking the idea.

“Precisely, let’s see how this works out, and we’ll improvise,” I said, and we talked about this and that.

It seemed like the start of a new life, and a routine was in place. Mom and Vanshika used to walk a long distance from the guest room, stay until lunch, then again come back later and stay until late evening visiting hours. Mom had taken a long unpaid leave from school, and Vanshika was missing all her classes.

After a few weeks, Vanshika left to continue her engineering degree. I was now in a much better condition—still had one plastered leg, but could move around in a wheel chair on my own.

Sometime later, on opening the bandages on the missing right shoulder, the doctors realized that the wound wasn’t healed. They decided to cover it up with a small graft of my skin.

“Have a heart ma’am, enough operations for this life,” I said with a smile to the nurse who came to get me ready for the operation, early in the morning one day.

“And the next one too,” she said with a vibrant smile, “let’s go Lt. Siddhant.”

Soon, I was in the Operation Theater and a couple of doctors were hovering around.

“Lt. Siddhant, are you still awake?” a doctor asked from behind his mask.

“Yes sir,” I said feebly, while the general anesthesia was taking its effect gradually.

“We’re going to cut a patch from your thigh,” he said, “you choose which leg.”

“What a question,” I thought.

“Please take it from the right leg sir, it’s off-road as it is,”

I said aloud.

“Good choice,” the doctor said, looking at the plaster on my right leg. The operation got over in a few hours.

In the evening, I was sitting in the corridor in a wheel chair, with Mom. It was a pleasant evening, with birds chirping and the grass smelling sweet.

“Mom, I always remember that time when out of nowhere, Dad was diagnosed with Leukemia. It was just an annual medical checkup; out of the blue,” I said touching the cord of those memories.

“Your Dad was very optimistic, and never let that reality bring his spirit down,” Mom said, reminiscing those times.

“I still remember, a week after that you had to sing a song in the Corps Day party,” I said.

“I was still in a state of shock, the world had moved away from under my feet. But, your Dad convinced me—we have to accept the reality and move on,” she said.

“And you gave one of the best performances that night,” I said, with my voice progressively becoming energetic, “You both have inspired us in many ways.”

“Good evening ma’am,” I heard an officer call out after some time, and saw Lt. Cdr. Chavan, a Naval Officer coming up with his left hand in plaster.

“A very good evening to you,” Mom said to him, “how’s your fractured wrist now?”

“Taking it’s time ma’am,” he said with a pleasing smile, “how was your operation Siddhant?”

“It was fine sir,” I said and then complained on a jocular note,

“I believe they only needed a 1-inch by 1-inch patch. For that they took out a humongous 3-inch by 4-inch skin graft from my thigh. Were they trying to cover the Eifel tower or something?”

“Really?” he asked, laughing aloud, “how convenient.”

“Anyway, as long as I get running soon,” I finished.

“His writing is coming out nicely ma’am,” he said, sitting down in the adjacent seat.

“Yes, he writes in a diary with his left hand every day after lunch,” Mom said proudly, “he has pages full of a... a... a... b... b... b...

c... c... c...”

“Aw, it’s barely legible sir, mom,” I said, “I’ve not started writing articles yet.”

“If you notice carefully ma’am, most of the pages would be full of—D, i, v, y, a, for no particular reason,” he said, throwing a naughty smile at me. My eyes just acknowledged his subtle indication, and Mom smiled pleasingly.

“It’s very inspiring ma’am,” Chavan sir continued, “By the way, have you seen him driving these days?”

“Driving, as in?” she asked inquisitively.

“He speeds up on his wheel chair with the left hand across the corridor and for stopping, holds the left wheel all of a sudden.

It gives the effect of a car rotating and coming to a stop in style,” he said, “it’s an amazing sight.”

“S-i-d-d-h-a-n-t,” Mom said amusingly, gradually increasing the pitch of her voice.

“I don’t go that fast Mom,” I replied with a humble smile, “just for fun.”

Meanwhile my phone rang, I didn’t react and just looked at it since that was a missed call.

“They keep sending missed calls to each other,” Mom said with a smile.

“I know ma’am,” sir said knowingly, “do you know about his special after-dinner sweet dish?”

“What’s that?” Mom asked, as she got up to leave for the day.

“His one hour call with Lt. Divya after dinner,” he said, winking at me.

“Come on sir,” I said laughing away, as I wheeled away to see-off Mom from the Officers ward.

After a few weeks, the doctors finally removed the wires from my teeth. That day I was probably the happiest guy on earth. Many of the teeth were missing but that was fine, at least I could open my mouth now. Rohan came with his wife the next day with boneless chicken, and I had good homely food. Mom finally left to join her school since there were no more major operations left. It was now only about getting back to shape.

I had now moved on to walking on crutches; still preferred the wheel chair though since I could use only one crutch (with left hand). One of the following days, I was having lunch when Praveen, an NDA cadet recently admitted to the Officers ward, came in.

“Good afternoon sir,” he said pulling the chair next to me, “I was looking for you.”

“Yeah well, I’m not that hard to find,” I said, “so how was the physiotherapy?”

Praveen was a 5 th term cadet from November Squadron and had been doing exceedingly well. Unfortunately, he had a fall from a horse, and damaged his spine (weakened senses waist below). Even

though he knew that he might lose a term because of this, there was never even a flake of tension or sorrow on his face. That was the NDA fighting spirit—alive and kicking.

“Sir, how do you always manage to have a smile, in spite of everything?” Praveen asked offering an orange.

“You know it better right? It’s all in the mind,” I said, peeling off the orange, “remember your 4 th term camps, and 4 th term end of term period?”

“Quite an experience sir,” Praveen smiled, thinking about his previous term, “but really, the way you’ve taken this up is amazing.”

“I saw ‘Forrest Gump’ yesterday in the TV Room,” I said,

“remember Tom Hank’s line—‘Sh\*t happens?’ ”

“Yes sir, a classic,” he concurred, finishing his lunch.

“Absolutely, ‘Sh\*t happens, Life goes on,’ ” I said.

“Sh\*t happens, Life goes on,” Praveen said thoughtfully, “sir once you get out of here, trademark this dialogue.”

“Sure why not,” I said, as we moved out of the dining hall.

In the evening, I succumbed to a long impending urge and went to one corner of the corridor. I wheeled away to a point where no one could see me, and I cried.

I cried silently, and I cried hard.

“ I’m so sorry dude ,” I said aloud in my mind; there was no one around. “ I feel so guilty that all these months, I had never shed a single tear about

what's happened and what this really means; how heartless! ”

Yes, I was a soldier. Yes, I was a man and shouldn't cry, but I guess my right arm deserved that respect. I started thinking about the things, which I might never be able to do again.

“ Can I go swimming again? Will I be able to hold my baby? Will I be able to ride a bike? What about doing a handstand, is it possible? Won't be able to play a Guitar or Violin, right? ” I asked myself, as the list went on, till I put a stop to it.

“Right dude, stop this ‘ dukh ’-celebration,” I said aloud to myself and sat upright on my wheelchair. “ Dukh -celebration”

(the word “ dukh ” in Hindi means sorrow) was a term coined by Vanshika few years back. It was during one of those moments when all three of us were remembering Dad, sadly and fondly.

“You were a good ‘hand’ buddy, needless to say—you completed me , ” I said, personifying my missing arm and looking at the shoulder-less shirtsleeve. “I'll always regret that I couldn't even see you one last time. I was busy dying you know, dying and getting resuscitated. I fondly reminisce all the good times we spent as ‘One,’ and I really miss you.”

“Okay, now this is being silly,” I smiled and looked behind, hoping to see no one in the vicinity and thought—

“ The crux is — buddy, you're alive, it could have been much worse. You're back from the dead for a reason. Live your life while you're alive — spread that message to everyone, that's the motto; now please carry on. ”

I felt better and it seemed as though a heavy weight was off my shoulder. I wheeled back to the world, back with a smile to wear and a smile to spare. It was around 2000hrs now. I was busy singing a few good numbers near the lawn when Pradeep came up from behind.

“Sir, guess what, ‘Forrest Gump’ is coming on TV,” he said.

“Great, let’s watch,” I said and we went towards the TV room. I saw a couple of other officers sitting already. It was quite a sight; one was with right ankle in plaster, another one with the entire left leg plastered up, one with broken left hand, another one on neck support and so on.

“Hey Tiger, join in,” said one of the senior officers.

“Sir, one photo please,” one of the other young officers said to everyone, taking out a camera, as the wheel chairs, and officer patients got ready for the pose.

Suddenly, the national anthem played on the TV, and we all rose up immediately. What made it special was not the getting up part, which everyone learns in school anyway. It was the sight of people standing smartly and straight on one leg (including me), with complete disregard to their physical state at that time.

This was the spirit ingrained into all of us.

Next day, things started as usual. I was sitting with a couple of senior officers, listening to their good ol’ times, when a young girl, probably in her late teens, came forward.

“Hi, Lt. Siddhant?” she asked.

“Yes that’s me, hi there!” I said and excused myself from the discussion. After a while, the same old stories of senior officers of “in-my-times,” used to get a tad repetitive anyway.

“I’m Kanika, daughter of Col. Pathak, who’s admitted in that ward,” she said pointing towards one of the wards. She was full of energy and had the enthusiasm of a vibrant teenager.

“Of course, I’ve seen you a couple of times with sir and ma’am,”

I said juggling my memory.

“I just came to say that you sing very well,” she said with a lot of gusto.

“Thanks a lot Kanika, but pray tell me, where did you hear me sing?” I asked her, a bit surprised.

“Yesterday evening, when I was in the TV room,” she said with half a wink.

“Oh, so that was you,” I said remembering the incident. While I was singing songs next to the TV room yesterday evening, the TV suddenly became mute. As soon as I stopped singing, the TV started again. I had just wheeled away to the lawn at that time, wondering who was inside.

“You’re an Ex NDA, right?” she asked, “one of my friends has joined in N Squadron. Which Squadron were you?”

“That’s nice to hear, I’m a Foxy. There’s another November Squadron guy admitted here, I’ll introduce him sometime,” I said, looking back to see if Praveen was anywhere around.

“By the way, you see that aged uncle over there?” she asked pointing towards an old person.

“Yeah, what about him,” I said looking over. He was probably some officer’s father.

“He saw you talking through hands-free earphone yesterday,” she said and broke into a wide smile. “He said to me—that young officer had an accident and is talking to himself, he probably has a mental problem as well.”

“Goodness gracious,” I said, laughing my guts out, “I should make the earphone more visible.”

My cell phone then rang a familiar pattern of short missed calls, which meant it was time to talk (and not just a lovey-dovey missed call).

“That’s your girlfriend right?” she asked getting up, “the Lady Officer sitting behind you?”

“Yup, guess everyone knows the story,” I said smiling an innocent smile, as she bade goodbye and I dialed in. Divya was far up North and I was down South; separated by distances, but coupled in our minds.

A few months passed by, I was now up and running on my feet. The hospital had provided me a right arm artificial cosmetic

prosthesis. The Medical board had recommended invalidation out of regular service because of my extreme injuries, with due benefits of course.

However, I did not want to leave the Army and had never even imagined life out of the Army. As per procedure, I put forward an appeal to the Chief of Army Staff, and wrote the letter with my left hand. Divya had already joined her unit a while back. One of the evenings, we were having our regular calls.

“Siddhant, remember the day today?” she asked, seemingly very confident.

“Shucks! Don’t know what it is with women and dates,” I thought.

“Hmm...,” I said, trying to portray that I was thinking hard.

“Today was our first date,” she said in her pleasing voice.

“Oh yes, and you were looking so beautiful, as always,” I said covering up for my memory. She did look so beautiful that day—as always.

“You remember the top I was wearing—the pink one, right?” she continued. Well, I had seen her in a number of pink tops of different designs, and the need to remember that particular design was beyond me to fathom.

“Of course, I remember it distinctly,” I couldn’t help but say.

“Yeah, so my cousin sister—Kanica gave it to me,” she said, “by the way will you meet her when you go to Delhi this week for the Medical Appeal Board?”

“Of course, I will love to. Is that ‘Kanica’ with a ‘c’ or a ‘k’?” I enquired, out of context.

“Dude, really? This is what you want to ask her?” a voice deep inside said to me, as soon as the irrevocable words flew out of my mouth.

“Is there another Kanica in your life?” she asked, sounding naughtily unsure.

“Just a friend my love,” I said reassuringly, wondering why I brought this up in the first place.

“It’s a ‘c,’ but anyway she wanted to meet you,” Divya said, thankfully not cross-questioning further.

Next day in the morning, I went to meet up a young Captain admitted yesterday. He flew-in in a stretcher from Siachen Glacier and had critically severe injuries. After the introductions, two other officers and I just took a seat while the nurse administered some injections to him.

“Hello there,” I said, offering a chocolate to his two-year-old son, while his family stepped outside.

“It must be freezing there sir,” an officer commented.

“Yeah, the temperatures vary from -20°C on a pleasant summer afternoon to -50°C on a chilly winter,” he said smiling away.

“So as I was saying, we had gone on a routine patrol and got caught in a blizzard. After a few hours when I reached the tent, I realized that I had caught frostbite. For four days the base camp tried to send a rescue chopper, but the weather was so bad that they couldn’t reach or evacuate me.” He stopped to have a sip of tea as we looked at him intently.

“The damage was done, and there was nothing they could do. By the time I was shifted, the gangrene had spread, and to save me they had to do the needful.”

His voice was calm and composed as he spoke. There was a pleasing look on his face throughout. The officer had lost his entire right leg, half his left leg and half of his right hand. But the spirit was unwavering and as high as ever.

“That’s life guys,” sir said with a bright smile, “it could have been much worse.”

“You’re an inspiration for all of us here sir,” I said, shaking his left hand.

We left after some time and I just looked at his awe-inspiring demeanor. This is how one should be. It’s all in the mind. After spending so much time in the hospital, I also felt that we as human beings don’t realize what we have in hand—just by virtue of being healthy. So many things can happen to any one of us, any day, any time. However, we spend our lives cribbing about and fretting over one thing or the other. The mantra to live life is—

desire and toil for what you want, but also acknowledge and appreciate what you already have.

Anyway, I left for Delhi the next day, and met Kanica. She was as chirpy and as pretty (maybe a trifle more) as her sister. I came to know some spicy insider information on Divya as well. Girls, well, when God was coding their speech pattern, he deliberately left out the brevity parameter. He probably had a good laugh, and did the needful to the other kind to maintain the balance.

A few weeks later, I met a Lt. General from my regiment at the Army Headquarters. He was very helpful and the perfect epitome of humility. From the interaction though, I understood that the chances of things being back to normal were slim. The Appeal board gave the same recommendation, and the best-case scenario

was that I could fight it out in a court for years. I had to take a call now. Even if I won the case and continued in the forces, life was never going to be the same. I would be in a permanent low medical category throughout, affecting my responsibilities, postings to the front/field/high action areas, advance courses, and every other thing that makes life in the Armed forces

exciting. On the other hand, I didn't know where to start if I hung my uniform now.

Next day, I met four of my school time classmates who were in Delhi—Prashant, Rishabh, Rohan, and Ajay. Everyone had left our hometown—Jabalpur, and was well settled in the respective jobs.

We sat in the cafeteria of the Military Hospital for a long time, discussing all the fun times of yesteryears, and the whereabouts of others. After a few hours, we came around to an important discussion point.

“So this is where it stands guys,” I said, “you’re also saying that I should do an MBA. Vanshika said the same.”

“Yes, MBA from a very good college as I mentioned a few days back, or take a shot at IAS,” Prashant said, adjusting his glasses.

“Yeah well, I’m not really sure about IAS, maybe an MBA would be more in line of what I would like to do,” I said, sinking back into the chair.

“It’s good that you’re not taking up the typical jobs they are offering,” Rohan said, “once you get started, it becomes difficult to take out time.”

“Start preparing for these exams CAT, GMAT, XLRI, etc.,” Ajay said, pointing towards an advertisement in a newspaper.

“I believe ‘thinking’ of the next step is the easiest part,” I said looking at the article and smiled sadly, “but study for an exam—really?”

“As if Army doesn’t have regular written exams of its own,”

Rishabh chuckled, and ended up choking on his coffee.

“That’s still better than studying from scratch for competitive exams,” I said and continued, now having made up my mind for sure. “I think I’ll go to Pune, join one of these coaching forums, and break sweat for the exams.”

“Good idea, Saurabh is also working in Pune now, so you guys can catch up,” Prashant said as we finished our coffee.

All of them left in a while, and I called up home. Vanshika had been consistently pushing through this idea in my mind for the last two weeks, citing various possible courses of action, types

of exams, syllabus, dates and what not. She had done considerable amount of homework for me on this.

“Vanshika, I’ve finally decided that I’ll start preparing for the MBA exams,” I said to her.

“That’s great bhaiya , finally,” she said with exuberance, “I know that you will do very well.”

“Yeah, easier said than done,” I chuckled, “I’ve just identified which mountain to climb; reaching the peak is still far away.”

“My son will surpass every mountain,” I heard Mom saying somewhere in the background.

After several weeks of follow up, the Army Headquarters signed off the papers for my release from active duty, on medical grounds.

“Capt. Siddhant, you’re an Ex-NDA and I know that you will do well, whatever you take up next,” the Commandant of the hospital said, while another officer finished the final paper work.

“Thank you sir, I’ll make sure that I live-up to these expectations,” I said, inverting my left hand for a right-handshake.

“Siddhant we need to cut your I-card now, to submit to the Headquarters,” the other officer said, “you can get a new one made for ex-servicemen later.”

“Sure sir,” I said, and looked at him picking up a scissor, to go ahead with what seemed to be routine for him. Deep inside, I felt a red-hot iron rod piercing through my heart—stabbing repeatedly in different places as he cut the Identity card into two pieces.

The realization came in a split second as the final cut went through, and the other piece fell on the table in a slow motion.

This was it, my very own inflection point. As of this moment, I was an ex-serviceman. Two days later, I was home and after reaching the station, we went towards the parking lot.

“Mom, I’ll drive the car,” I said and saw the expected shock in her eye.

“How will you drive Siddhant,” she exclaimed, and tried to defer the idea, “maybe after a few days.”

“Don’t worry Mom, I’ve thought through it,” I said replete with confidence, “people talk on the phone and drive with one hand all the time.”

“But, it’s been so long since you drove,” Mom said perplexed, thinking about the logic.

“I’ll be careful mom,” I said and gave her a tight hug. I took the keys; it wasn’t that difficult especially with my left hand being next to the gears.

“That’s my boy,” Mom said with a sigh of relief, seeing that I was maneuvering the car easily like never before, “but don’t drive fast.”

“Sure Mom, 35kmph is not fast,” I smiled back and took a right turn, “let’s pick up Vanshika.”

I spent the next few days in gearing up for the move to Pune and the start of the next mission. The Army was considerate enough to provide support by offering a temporary accommodation at nominal rates. On Divya’s front, I knew that her mother wasn’t supportive of our relationship. However, we were going strong, so all was well on that side. One beautiful Monday morning, I reached the Pune railway station. The sun had just come out after a long spell of rain. It was good to be back to the city where my alma mater stood (NDA).

With the head held high, I took a deep breath and embraced the battleground. I looked at my left hand and up into the sky, and said aloud to

myself, “ This is it Siddhant, you ‘have it’ in you; Carpe diem dude, as they say — Seize the day! ”

“Still much better off Sid, things could have been much worse, The sky is only the lower limit, to thee is the Universe.”

## Rise Of The Phoenix

This was the beginning of the next phase of my life, and once again, it was starting in Pune. The accommodation provided by the Army in the Officers’ quarters was decent. Thanks to all the varied experiences (and stamping on the drill parade ground for so many years), I wasn’t starting from ground zero, but from 1000

feet underneath that. I bought a couple of books suggested by friends and enrolled in the weekend batch in one of the coaching forums for GMAT/CAT exams. Essentially, I had to conquer two mountains for the written exams—Quantitative Aptitude and Verbal Ability (Mathematics and English in simple terms).

“So Capt. Siddhant,” one of the instructors in the forum said after the end of the first class, “can I call you Capt.?”

“Yes sir, sure,” I said humbly.

“Excellent,” he said smiling away, while other students herded out. “I didn’t mention in the class since most of the students

are aware, but have you joined any MBA online forums, like Pagalguy.com?”

“Did you say ‘Pagalguy’ or did I hear you wrong?” I said, sounding astounded.

“You heard it right,” he said with an I-knew-this-was-coming look in his eyes.

“Oh,” I said hesitantly, “is it some kind of parody on MBAs or something?”

“Not at all,” he said gleefully, “it’s a forum for MBA aspirants where best of the minds meet to collaborate and crack these exams.”

“Sounds interesting sir, thanks for that,” I said bidding him farewell, “this I’ve got to see today.”

I walked back to my room. It was a 5km brisk walk, but a good way to ensure that I get some exercise. After reaching, I had a good look at the entire course. I was going back to the world of

“Permutations and Combinations, Time and Distance, Probability, Geometry, Numbers, etc.” and reminisced my school days. The

“Verbal Ability” Section was apparently the one that really made a difference. After lunch in the Officers Mess, I opened my newly bought laptop and googled for Pagalguy.com . That was that, and I spent seven straight hours going through the forum, various posts and communities. In fact, the forum members helped in resolving a doubt I had yesterday, in one hour flat with two possible approaches for it. The Pagalguy (PG) website was indeed a treasure trove, and a boon to me.

After a quick dinner and update call at home, I called up Divya.

“These days you don’t get time for me,” she said in an artificial complaining tone. I could imagine her making a sulking face at that.

“Oh why do you say that,” I said with a wide smile, “I had gone out, no? All my time is only for you.”

“Yeah okay,” she said, “so what did you do today?”

“Well, I’ve joined an online community for MBAs called Pagalguy.com,” I said expecting a reaction.

“Pagalguy?” she said surprised, “So that’s where all you Pagal MBA guys will go hunting for dates with girls in the city?”

“No my dear, very funny,” I chuckled, laughing at that interpretation, “it’s for the exam preparations.”

“Yeah sure,” she said, not convinced yet, “I’ll believe only when I see it.”

“How many girls are there in your coaching class by the way?” she continued inquisitively.

“Doesn’t matter love, none in my world there is, as beautiful as thou,” I said amorously.

“Aw, so sweet,” she said, probably with sparkling eyes, “are you standing in your balcony Siddhant?”

“Yes I am,” I said, stepping out, “now.”

“Can you see the moon?” she said, I could hear her tone change as she probably looked up at the moon.

“Yes love, I am,” I said looking up, “and I can see you.”

“I’m missing you Siddhant,” she said in her mellifluous voice,

“waiting to meet again.”

We stood there, staring at the moon at the same time, both hearts beating far away. After an hour or so, I was sitting on my study table, back to the forum and my books.

There was a lot to achieve and limited time at hand. Twenty-four hours in a day seemed too less. We should have probably negotiated for more, gazillions of centuries back. Contrarily, twenty-four hours in one day seemed far overboard, back in Academy days.

Two months passed by, and my preparations were on with full swing now. In these two months, I had focused on getting the fundamentals right—the ones buried deep into NDA&IMA’s Drill Square and the rigors of Army life. My handwriting with left hand was legible enough by now. More importantly, I had picked up speed, which was critical for competitive exams. Quantitative Aptitude was interesting, with all the number crunching, shortcuts and formulae. However, I was more of a words guy, than a numbers one and had a natural inclination towards the “Verbal

Ability” (VA) Section. I became a very active contributor on several VA related threads on the Pagalguy forum.

One early morning, after a short nap, my alarm went off at 0230hrs. In a few minutes, I was back on my study table and on the forum.

“Hey, @ Siddhant\_nd , you there?” a chat came up on Pagalguy site after an hour, from another user— Kat.Kracker .

“Hey, @Kat.Kracker, you’re up so early?” I replied promptly. I had chatted up with him a few days back over a Probability question.

*Siddhant nda was my username on the forum. When it came to choosing a user name while joining, I felt that this was the avatar that brought out who I really was (at heart)—Siddhant +*

*NDA = Siddhant nda.*

Him: “Yup, have to catch a train. I need your thoughts on one SC question.”

Me: “Okay, shoot...”

Him: “The statement is—‘when John was in Paris, he not only visited the Eiffel Tower, but also the Louvre,’ what’s wrong with it?”

SC stood for “Sentence Correction,” the area I loved most. I read the statement and knew what was wrong.

Me: “It is the usage buddy, ‘not only-but also,’ a concept of parallel construction.”

Him: “You got me!”

Me: “This should be—When John was in Paris, he visited not only A, but also B.”

Him: “Oh, okay that sounds simple.”

Me: "Wait a second..."

I vaguely remembered a rule, and looked up at my wall adjoining the study table. I had scribbled and pasted a lot of notes, formulas, shortcuts, etc. on the wall.

Me: "Here's a more apt reason—for a correlative conjunction, each correlative should be just before the words to be connected."

Him: "Oh really, I prefer the simpler rule you gave me earlier."

Me: "Sure, as long as it helps..."

Him: "Thanks dude, I will read up on this 'correlative conjunction,' so that..."

Me: "So that...?"

Him: "So that I can 'correlate' an 800 score to the 'conjunct' influence of SC and RC."

Me: "Hah Hah, enough of correlation and conjunction. I'm going to sleep now."

Him: "Into a deep slumber, eh!"

Me: "Not really, I got to wake up at 0600hrs for the morning jog."

Him: "You Army guys; always fit!"

I signed off in a while, and came back to my bed. It was time to catch up on sleep, and rejuvenate myself for yet another day of burning sweat. As I reached my bed, there was suddenly a sharp pulsating pain where my shoulder used to be. I had devised my own way to deal with the phantom pain that occurred now and then.

After significant patting on the area from my left hand, the pain subsided and I lied down. Before switching off the light, I turned to look at the heavy

prosthetic hand kept in a corner.

With all due respect to the people involved in making it, carrying the dead weight whenever I had to go outside was a real pain in the a\*\*. Well, no one said it was going to be easy. I just closed my eyes and promised to buy myself a new, lighter and better hand, after the exams got over.

As per my Mission protocol, every hour, every moment had a purpose. Sometimes, I used to bunk lunch (and have heavy snacks) to utilize the time spent in walking to the Officers Mess in doing something more productive. The routine, which on the face of it might look monotonous, was exciting. Every day I used to go for a jog in the morning, followed by one-hand pushups and other exercises. In the morning just before leaving for breakfast, I used to post my solution to the QQAD— Quant-Question-A-Day thread on the PG forum. By the time I was back from the Mess, there were already responses from multiple users, with different approaches to the same question.

There were coaching classes, self-study and short breaks during rest of the day. The beauty of this competition lay in the fact that all of us were part of a big sharing community, with one goal—“crack the GMAT” or as they say, “bell the CAT.”

One of the following nights, I dressed up into formals for dinner in the Officers Mess, and stepped out. After crossing the Mess gate, a voice called out from behind.

“Siddhant?” the voice asked, quizzically and unsure.

I turned around to see someone emerging from an office car. It was a bit dark, but as he came closer, there was a wide smile on our faces.

“Ashish Verma, what a pleasant surprise,” I said exuberantly. It was Capt. Ashish Verma- my ex-school classmate and Squadron-type, who had joined NDA before me. He probably got late today in some meeting, and was still in his morning uniform, with medals shining brightly.

“I was just passing by and thought I saw you,” he said, “are you posted here?”

“Not quite, it’s a long story,” I said.

“What happened to your right hand?” he said, looking towards my right calmly, “got hurt?”

“Yeah well, I did get ‘hurt’ actually,” I said with a wide smile.

Every time people noticed that something was amiss, they started with the least physically/mentally straining assumption (fracture, shoulder dislocation, and the likes). That’s probably human nature. People generally prefer not to hear about, or see bad things happening to near-dear ones. The good part about being a fauji was that we always looked at the bigger picture—as long as you’re alive, you’re alive, “go and live.” Accordingly, the reaction from all officers on coming to know of this was always to the tone of—“yeah, guess it happens, so what’s next.”

We had a quick dinner in his room, which happened to be in the same block as mine. I gave him a gist of all that had happened.

“That’s great, so now I have the Maj. General’s top-shot ADC staying right next to me,” I said, finishing my sweet dish—fruit custard.

“Not a big deal buddy, just a bit busy sometimes,” he said, getting up to bring his small diary.

“Of course and even in Parties all the officers’ daughters must be after you,” I said naughtily.

“No comments on that,” he said with a mischievous grin.

“By the way, you have your own car here right?” I said, getting an idea suddenly.

“Yup I do, it’s parked around the corner,” he said stepping out to show it, “do you drive?”

“You bet, piece of cake,” I said and told him how it was easier to drive a manual transmission car with a missing right hand, than a missing left one.

“You remember Dhavan from my course?” I asked him, as we stepped out to get some fresh air.

“Yeah, he was one of the Corporals when I was SCC. I don’t think he’ll remember me fondly though,” he said, remembering the punishments he had given to him.

“Hah Hah, Dhavan and one of my YO-type is coming here this week, I’ll need your car then.”

“Sure, I’m not here but I’ll leave the keys with you.”

After a while, I left with his car keys, to get back to my studies. Two days later, Dhavan and Lucky arrived in the evening and after dinner, I showed them my mini War room.

“Look at all these notes,” Dhavan said to Lucky, moving closer towards the wall. He looked intently at the small pamphlets of formulae, shortcuts and what not, on the wall.

“Your writing is better than before,” Lucky said, looking at it closer, “you should have been there for rest of the course as well.”

“Sure, so that you could use my notes for exams?” I asked him playfully.

“What else,” Lucky said, “I had to study so much because of you.”

“What is this ‘VAN C U TIP TRASH,’ is it something like our NDA notes strategy?” Dhavan asked pointing to one of the pages on the wall.

“Yes, precisely, it’s for handling English grammar questions” I said gladly and then turned towards Lucky. “In NDA we used to make shortcuts out of the first alphabet of key words, for the answers to Military strategy questions.”

“So each of these letters stand for something?” Lucky asked.

“Yes, VAN is actually for my sis’ Vanshika, so ‘VAN see (C) you (U) TIP TRASH’ is the sentence that I need to remember,” I said, continuing my explanation. “C stands for Comparison error, U for Universal error and similarly V, A, N, T and so on.”

“Phew, I am not built for studying,” Lucky yawned, switching on my music system.

“We missed you guys during rest of the YOs,” Dhavan said, sitting down on the chair, “How’s Divya doing now?”

“She’s fine, back to office,” I said, taking out my YOs time photo album.

“Siddhant, does your denture come off,” Lucky asked with a fictitious face of sincerity, and a wide smile, “when you kiss her?”

“Thanks for your genuine concern,” I said, pinning him down, as he tried to control his laughter, “and for your information, no it doesn’t.”

“Okay fine, leave me,” he said, as we calmed down, “I care for you, nothing else.”

“Of course, no other reason,” I said, and loosened the grip.

“You’re also getting permanent teeth implanted right?”

“Yeah, that’ll make my full blown smile worth additional INR 60, 000,” I said.

“Did Govind or Sangeeta call you?” Dhavan asked, looking at one of our outing photos, “they’re getting married this year end.”

“Yup, Govind called me a few days back, that’s the third pair amongst the YOs/YTOs getting hitched.”

“By the way you’re coming for my marriage right?” Dhavan continued.

“Yes definitely, by December my exams will be through as it is,”

I said and then added on, remembering something, “you’re both still party to the pact right?”

“The ‘pact,’ yes of course,” Dhavan said, remembering our discussion in the hospital, “no revealing of our secrets to the better halves.”

“I don’t have anything to hide guys,” Lucky said slyly, trying to control his about-to-erupt-laughter.

“Don’t even make us start Lucky, remember the ‘red shirt gift,’ and...”

Before I even finished, that led to a mini playful scuffle as we started blurting out the harmless secrets that resided between the three of us.

“What about you guys, what are her parents saying?” Dhavan asked after we settled down.

“Her mother is against us, father as well to an extent,” I said,

“but we both are going strong, and that’s what matters I guess.”

“Aunty is fine with this, right?”

“Yeah Mom’s an angel, although they’re from a totally different background than ours, she has no qualms at all,” I said happily.

“Aunty and Vanshika are very brave even otherwise. Hope they’re doing well.” Lucky said.

“Yeah, Vanshika is in her final year now, Mom is still teaching in Army School,” I said. “They were here last month.”

Dhavan and Lucky left after two days of merriment. This had indeed been a welcome break, and I was going to miss all the fun that we had in the last few days. Anyway, life moves on and each one of us has to drift along.

Few more weeks passed, and it was time to take the GMAT exam. On the night prior to the D-day, I watched a movie of “Mr. Bean,”

revised the list of errors that I had made in the earlier

“mocks,” and slept in early. Next day, I reached the test center, finished the formalities and prayed hard before the first question came on the screen. Thanks to all the mock exams taken, this felt no different. The only difference was—there was a figurative knife next to my throat with an inscription saying—“

Dude, It’s now or never.” As I chose my option to the last question, I saw the clock ticking backwards on the screen—“Time remaining—00:00:17.” The seconds seemed to move faster, as I quickly had a relook at my answer. Finally, with my heart pounding its hardest ever, I clicked on the submit button with two seconds to spare.

What followed that was a blank blue page with the message

“Processing,” and an arrow moving in a circular direction (clockwise). I was barely breathing. The result of all my hard work, and my future depended on the outcome of the next few seconds. At least 100 different thoughts were crossing my mind on the positive/negative of what-if, as my eyes gazed at the arrow going in circles. Then suddenly, my heart missed a beat or two, as the screen changed. I had scored 740/800, 98 percentile. Whoa!

I smiled, and smiled for a while calmly.

It wasn’t the best score possible, but well it was an awesome one. I got up from the chair quietly, not showing any reaction as others in the adjoining rooms were still taking their exam. After coming out, I looked up and thanked God for everything he had done for me. After that, I made a couple of calls, and replied to all-the-best messages from friends.

“Hey Captain sir, congratulations,” one of the guys from Pagalguy forum called up, as I reached my room, “we knew that you were going to do great.”

“Hi buddy, it feels good,” I said visibly elated, still not able to believe that I had done it, “thanks a lot for all the wishes and support. I couldn’t have done it without them.”

“I have my GMAT after two months sir, any pointers that you can share?”

“Yes of course,” I said, as I switched on my laptop, “I’m going to write a post on the forum, on my preparation strategy.”

“I’ll wait for that sir, any quick pointers?” he asked inquisitively.

“Take a lot of Mock GMATs—at least 15-20 of them. The aim should not be to see the score, but to see where you’re going wrong,” I said, pausing for taking a deep breath. “Make a list of all the mistakes you make especially for DS & SC, and make sure you don’t repeat them.”

“Thanks a lot sir,” he said happily.

In the next few hours, I wrote my experience on the forum. I attributed this score to the sharing of knowledge and expertise via these forums, and dedicated my “Sentence Correction” notes to all future aspirants by publishing them on the web. I titled the pdf file by my user name—“Siddhant\_ndu SC Notes.”

“@Siddhant\_ndu sir, just saw the notes you uploaded,” a fellow *Pagalguy* member—@Ahmed am posted on chat just when I was about to log off at night.

Him: “Firstly, congratulations on the awesome score sir.”

Me: “Thanks a lot buddy, finally this phase is over”

Him: “Have you posted on the GMAT thread yet?”

Me: “Yup, just google the following—‘Racked up a 740’ for the link.”

Him: “Great, if I remember correctly, with GMAT you are targeting only ISB right?”

Me: "Yeah, I definitely want to join ISB."

Him: "What about CAT sir, you're targeting IIMs too right?"

I thought of the next step, the only other exam in line—the CAT.

It was a couple of months away.

Me: "Yes, if I make it to ISB, then the only situation that will put me in a quandary is an IIM-A admission."

Him: "That would be a nice situation to be in. We're re-titling you as 'SC Guru,' what do you think?"

Me: "Hah Hah, Thanks buddy, hope I can be of help to others as well."

We finished our chat in some time, and I went towards my bed with a smile of satisfaction. My mind went back to the point on ISB

vs. IIM-A. I wanted to study in India itself (vis-à-vis foreign universities) and be relatively closer to my dear ones. ISB being a one year course was just perfect, and I could get back to working soon (in a different battle ground though—the corporate one). At the same time, a full time two-year course, would give me more time for this transition. Anyway, there was still the application process, shortlisting, interview round and further shortlisting, before I could think of joining these esteemed institutes. I was clear about at least one thing that I wanted from life—a perfect balance of everything—too much money vs. just enough, good vs. bad, family vs. work life, and the likes.

Within a few days, my SC notes got viral and it seems, helped many aspirants. I started a new thread on Pagalguy with one question every day on "Sentence Correction"—my forte. The feeling of helping out others, and being able to contribute to others'

success gave me utmost satisfaction. It was a pure selfless cause, and probably a way for me to give back to the World.

I got shortlisted for the ISB interview and in a few weeks, it was time for the D-day. I drove down to the Taj Hotel. I was wearing a light blue shirt, blue formal cufflinks, matching tie and black formal trousers. The ambience of the environment was spectacular. While waiting in the lobby, I tried not to think of what was going to happen next. I had read on the forums that at times the two-three interviewers take grill-interviews to break people down, and see their reaction. Whatever it is, I was all set with my armory and good to go. Soon, it was time. I had one last look at the reflection in the mirror next to the Panel Room door, and said to myself—“Carpe diem, dude.”

“Good afternoon Captain Siddhant, please have a seat,” a bearded Gentleman in a dark gray suit said with a pleasing smile.

“Thank you sir, ‘Siddhant’ is just fine,” I said emphasizing on the name, and smiled back. I had a quick look at the room.

Surprisingly there was no one else in the panel, at least for now.

The Gentleman was part of the Admissions Committee and came with a considerable amount of industry experience. After a quick round of personal questions, he got to the specifics around my profile and the essay questions.

“So, how did it feel to get all those salutes from men, when you were what —23/24?” he asked with an inquisitive look in the eyes.

“It felt great sir,” I said, “it also led to the realization of the subtle nuances of this ‘respect.’ ”

“What nuances Siddhant?”

“The respect one gets in the forces by virtue of the ‘rank’ is not absolute. True ‘respect’ is the one that is earned by virtue of actions, experience, knowledge and demeanor.”

“Interesting,” he said with a pause, “it’s more like—a true Leader should not only ‘talk’ the talk, but also ‘walk’ the talk.” I nodded, so far so good.

“I see that you’ve got a good recommendation from senior Army officers,” he said, “how close was your interaction with them?”

The questions went on.

“What do you think are the underlying reasons for Fratricide in the Army—so many cases of soldiers firing at their seniors/

colleagues?” Then there were a few more.

“So Siddhant, what value would you bring to the class?” he said after a while, looking straight into my eyes.

“Sir, I believe my diverse background will bring in a different perspective to the classroom discussions. I might not have tasted the waters of management from a business context, but there would only be a few others, who would bring in ‘our’ flavor of management.”

“That is true in a way,” he said. Then, bending forward and after a pause continued, “So you’re taking CAT as well right, like all others?”

“Yes sir,” I said with a smile, realizing where this was going,

“but only as a Plan B.”

“If you make it to IIM-A/B/C as well, what will you choose Siddhant?” he said with a cunning smile, “don’t you think ISB is a tad costly?”

“Sir it’s costly yes, but all these months while I was preparing for this new phase of life, I had only ISB in mind.” I gave a few more reasons in support of my answer (faculty, duration, student profile, and others).

“So Siddhant,” he said seemingly satisfied with the logic,

“define yourself in one line.”

“Ah,” I said clearing my throat, and thinking hard. This one-liner had to be impactful.

“In 10 seconds,” he said with a foxy grin, interrupting my line of thinking, “and your time starts.”

“Well, at the cost of immodesty,” I said, thinking on the fly, “I feel resilience, deftness, integrity and humility are the words that define me.”

“Hmm,” he said, “Your essays were well written Siddhant.”

“Thanks a lot sir,” I said humbly.

“Tell me honestly, who wrote your essays? Did you get them reviewed by someone?”

“I wrote them sir,” I said with surety, “and I was my own critic.

During the preparation, I developed a liking for the finer aspects of grammar. In fact, I ran a thread on “Sentence Correction,” in one of the MBA forums— Pagalguy .”

“Yeah, I have heard about that forum,” he said, smiling and nodding in approval.

“Every day I used to post a question in the morning, and publish the answers the next day. It was a good way to help others, and build up my own knowledge at the same time.”

There were a couple of more questions, and then it was time to leave.

“Siddhant, I insist that you read this book called—‘Eats, Shoots & Leaves’ by Lynne Truss.”

“Sounds interesting sir, I’ll definitely do that.”

“Come and tell me that you’ve read it, when you join us,” he said, and then added after a pause, “If you make it that is.”

“Sure sir,” I said, shaking his hand, hoping that his words come true.

I came out remembering the cautionary note others had shared, on how the panel makes almost everyone feel that they've made it.

However, in my heart I was sure that I have made it. After a month, it was time for the CAT exam. I was mentally all set to join ISB and to leave the city a few hours after taking the exam.

The exam was tough of course, but went off pretty well, also because there was very less tension (and no dagger on the throat). That night I kissed Pune city goodbye once again, and left for home. It was now time to take a break from months of sweating it out.

### The Dilemma

“So what are your plans now Siddhant?” Mom asked a few days later. We were having delicious hot evening snacks together.

“I have well-spun plans to enjoy Mom,” I said happily, “never studied so much in my life.”

“Mom, bhaiya is going to meet her next month,” Vanshika giggled, and added value to the conversation.

“Well, that’s in the agenda,” I said waiving away the comment, given that we weren’t a secret anyway. “Before joining wherever I do, I need to buy that new lighter prosthetic hand, meet my Madras regiment officers who are in Jaipur currently, and attend Dhavan’s marriage next month.” This period of exams-over-awaiting-results, was one of lull after the storm.

“Hey Mom,” I called out a few weeks later from Jaipur, “I’ve made it to ISB.”

“Congratulations Siddhant,” she said happily, “we’re all proud of you.”

“Thanks to the wishes of everyone Mom, and blessings of all our elders sitting with the one up above,” I said, closing my eyes and thanking God profusely.

“Yes Siddhant, give a treat to all your unit officers there.”

“Mom, they have already organized a party tonight, so it’s all in good time,” I said bursting with excitement.

In the next few hours, I answered a couple of congratulatory calls, and partied with other officers. After a few days, CAT

results came out as well and I had received interview calls from most of the IIMs. I decided to give the interview only for IIM-A.

Life was going fine. I strongly believed that even her parents would let go of all the worldly issues, when they hear this news.

“What are you doing bhaiya ?” Vanshika asked peeping into my Laptop one day.

“I came across something called ‘blogging.’ I’m starting a blog of my own,” I said, typing in the name for the link as

—“siddhantmishranda.blogspot.in.”

“So you will write all your experiences. But how will others know about it?” she enquired.

“I’m just writing for myself. It’s like writing a Diary; just that it’s publicly available.”

“Okay, maybe someone will read it and get some inspiration,” she said, moving on to her books.

“If I can make a difference in anyone’s life, there would be nothing like it,” I said.

In the next one hour, I wrote my first blog post, which was essentially about the Love Story. Five days later, I continued with the accident part and added the thought process that came naturally when I had regained consciousness. What happened with me could have been much worse; I was better off with just one major loss. The next day I updated the blog with the story of my GMAT/CAT preparation, and the latest update on the good news.

“Bro, you’ve received quite a few comments,” Vanshika said, after dinner.

“Is it?” I asked, switching on my laptop, “let me see.”

“I wonder how they came to your blog, but you’ve already started a fan following,” she said and went off to tell mom.

There were many comments from people across the country, essentially praising the spirit of us Army officers. Apparently, the blog was spreading across the board like fire through a dry dense jungle. It felt great to receive all these messages, but I also realized that now there were people reading my blog, and I had to keep that in mind. Few days later, I blogged my own analysis of the pros and cons for IIM-A vs. ISB (of course the Interview round was still to be conquered for IIM-A). I also added a disclaimer (given that the readership was extending every day) that I had given my views solely based on my parameters, and priorities in life.

A month later, I had my Group Discussion/Interview for IIM-A in New Delhi. It went off smoothly and the Interviewing panel seemed to be impressed. I had a feeling that I’ll make it to IIM-A as well. Satisfied with the events of the morning, I caught a bus for Meerut city.

“Hi Siddhant, you’ve come finally,” Divya smiled happily, as I landed up in her office in the evening, “so how did it go?”

Divya was posted in Meerut, which is close to New Delhi, so not visiting her was out of question. Anyway, I wanted to show her the significantly lighter prosthetic right hand that I got custom built from a Delhi based company. It didn’t have any functionality, but was considerably lighter and gave me an equal shoulder on both sides. What else could I have wanted ?

“It was great love, and I might just get a chance to make that decision between IIM-A and ISB,” I said, settling down on a chair. We were sitting in her office and for a moment, I remembered the good old days in the Army. She was performing duties of an Adjutant for the unit.

“What is that?” she asked, looking at my bag from which a gift parcel was jetting out.

“Oh that,” I said taking it out, “is a gift from mom.”

As expected, she immediately got up and opened the gift, removing the packaging tenderly.

“It’s beautiful,” she exclaimed with sparkling eyes, looking at the dress Mom had sent for her.

“But you shouldn’t have brought it, what was the need?” she continued, still looking at the light pink color “ salwaar-suit ”

from end-to-end.

“Oh okay, I’ll take it back,” I said playfully and offered my hand to do the needful.

“Siddhant sir,” a familiar voice exclaimed from behind, exuberantly.

“Hi Raveena, it’s been a long time!” I said, in an equally excited voice. It had been a while since we last met during YOs.

Her posting was also in Meerut itself, in another unit. She came here three months back, and since then the duo had been having a great time.

“Yes sir, my office isn’t far from here. I’ve heard you’ve done great in the MBA exams. How was your interview?”

The three of us sat over a cup of coffee, and shared the stories from good old times. After dinner, Divya and I sat on the terrace, looking at the moon. We were discussing our future together.

“We’ll keep one cute Pomeranian puppy,” Divya said, “the way I had at my home, and his room will be here.”

Divya was making a small sketch of our future home on a paper, with the boundary wall, garden, driveway and all the works.

“Can we also have a separate Gym room?” I asked with full sincerity, as if this was really the master blueprint of our future home.

“Sure, I saw that coming,” she said and quickly extended the size of our home.

We sat there for some more time, gazing at the stars.

“My parents are never going to agree to this,” she said sadly, “but I love you.”

Over the last few months, I had realized that this relationship might not last long. I had met her parents last month and the meeting didn’t end well. Although they were polite and well mannered, their thinking was undeniably outmoded and conservative. I also knew that being the eldest amongst her two siblings (both brothers), she had tremendous pressure on her.

“I’m sure it’s just a matter of time,” I said, “they will understand what will bring you, and in turn bring them more happiness.”

“Why are things so difficult for ‘us’? What did we do wrong?” she said softly, “we were so happy.”

“Yes we were love, and we will be,” I said, as she leaned on my shoulder.

“Why do you have to leave tomorrow morning itself?” she asked, after a moment.

“Do you have that song—‘ Lag ja gale’ in your cell phone?” she continued before I could answer the first question (for which I didn’t have an answer anyway).

“Yup, I do have it,” I said, taking out my phone to play it.

I realized in a few seconds that the mystical lyrics embodied this very moment. The lyrics went— “ Lag jaa galey, ki phir ye haseen raat ho na ho, shaayad phir is janam mein, mulaakaat ho na ho. ” The poetic words translated to— “take me in embrace, for who knows, if this beautiful night will ever come again. In this lifetime, we may or may never ever meet again.”

“I can’t live without you Siddhant,” Divya said with a frail voice, with pearls of pure love flowing down her cheeks.

“We’ll always be together Divya,” I said and hugged her with tears flowing out of my eyes as well.

We listened to that song in a deep embrace, and wept silently.

All our time spent together flashed in front of my eyes, as I considered the possibility of what if tonight was the last night that we were together. Over the last few weeks, I had been receiving inconspicuous signals from her that this was not going to work out. Her family was putting a lot of pressure. There was political coercion from a close relative as well (on the lines of regionalism). I couldn’t see her like this, and hoped that somehow things will work out.

Our relationship worsened as days passed by, and our talks became limited to bare essentials. Soon enough, that final call came one evening.

“I thought you had a party tonight?” I asked her in the usual tone, stepping out into the balcony.

“Siddhant, I can’t do this anymore, I can’t be with you,” she said in one go and sounded firm. Her tone was rude. I couldn’t believe that this was happening.

“What happened, why are you talking like this? Did your Mom call up again?”

“I can’t go on like this. I’m the one who’s getting caught between you and my parents, and I have made a decision.”

“Fine,” I said, as the realization dawned upon me. The words stung me as if a butcher was slicing my heart repeatedly in a chopping board. There was a minute of silence and the whole world seemed gloomy.

“But I love you and my true love will always be you,” she said with a sudden change in her tone. Probably my consent brought in the realization

to her as well.

“We’ll always be friends Siddhant,” she sighed in her sweet voice.

“No Divya,” I said, taking control over my emotions, “we can never be ‘friends’ again. Things can never be the same.”

She started crying quietly, and there was a long silence as none of us spoke.

“I wanted to tell you this earlier, but didn’t want it to affect your interviews. I really can’t take my mother and at times my father, crying and literally begging me to forget you.”

I kept quiet.

“In a month you will start a fresh life,” she continued, “it will be easier for you to forget me.”

“Speak for yourself Divya, you have no clue how much I love...” I spoke up, but didn’t feel like even completing that sentence.

I did see reason in why she had taken so long to do this, but this was no time for rhyme or reason. Our future together was over, and she had no right to think that I was going to forget about her—ever. We kept quiet for another ten minutes.

“I didn’t want to end this on a happy note, because that would make this separation even more difficult,” she said breaking the silence.

“But it’ll be difficult for both of us,” she continued in a more firm voice now, “we’ll speak few times a week, gradually reduce talking, meet up once a while and remain friends.”

“Divya, I think it’s best if we never ever speak again,” I said without emotions. My heart was burning but the brain was in control. For me if this was it, then this was it. I preferred a sudden death to slow torture, for ending this relationship.

“Wish you luck Divya,” I said before she could say anything,

“Have a happy married life in the future, good night and good bye.”

I went back inside. Mom and Vanshika had slept by then. For a moment, in fact for an hour or so, I felt better and relaxed (rose-colored spectacles). I was finally out of all the complications of love life—the expectations, the arguments, the need for attention, this and that, and what not.

Over the next two hours, I played and sang along sad songs like

—“All By Myself,” “10000 promises,” “It must have been love, but it’s over now,” and the likes. Amongst Hindi ones there were—“

Kaisi hai ye udaasi chhaiyi ,” “ Jaane woh kaise, log the jinke, pyaar ko pyaar mila ,” and the likes. The last song I heard brought tears to my eyes. It was Euphoria’s Maaeri .

The song started—“ Taeriyaan maeriyaan bul gayaa, bul gayaa haar tae jeeth, haaeh maaei ki karna main jeeth nu, hovey naa jae meeth, hovey naa jae meeth. ” The emotionally moving lyrics translated to (although not as impactful in English)—“I’ve forgotten what someone else’s is or what’s mine, forgotten about winning or losing. Oh Mother, what do I do even if victory is mine, when that special one is no more in my life.”

I had always loved this song, and it conveyed all the thoughts that would have led to an alternate future, a future of us .

Anyway, after that I moved on to morale-boosting songs that said—

things would be just fine. Music—the right kind of music, has the power to bring one out of the worst of moods. This relationship was probably not meant to be, that’s why there were so many hindrances right from the accident, to the breakup. It was now done and dusted. The feelings were a sunk cost.

In a while, I was much more stable and thought only about the positive aspects of all that had happened. In effect, she did make sure that this break-up happens only after my IIM-A interview was finished. I opened my blog

and blogged the latest update. I titled it as –“Better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all,” a saying by Lord Alfred Tennyson.

Few days passed and many people had chatted with me/commented on my blog, commending the positive way I had taken all this. In fact, next day itself, I had boosted the morale of an Indian based out of Australia on chat, who had just gone through a breakup. I actually surprised myself at the way I was cheering others up, wherein deep within I was hurt so badly. One evening, her cousin sister Kanica called up.

“Hi Siddhant, I just read your blog, she has done it?” Kanica exclaimed.

“Hi Kanica, yes she has,” I said nonchalantly.

“I can’t believe it, I thought she was only joking about that Tarun guy,” she grumbled.

“Sorry, what Tarun guy?” I asked, startled by hearing a random name.

“I had promised her that I won’t tell you. But then, I thought she’s serious about you,” she said in a hushed voice, as she probably stepped out of her office.

“There is this Lt. Tarun Chimri that she’s been dating from October last year. He’s from our caste itself and her parents have already met his parents in December.”

“What? I can’t believe it,” I out-cried, wishing this call had never come.

“I don’t know the details, but he’s been sending her a lot of gifts which she has shown me proudly. She used to speak a lot about him, and he had even gifted her a separate phone for talking to him. I thought it’s only a passing phase, but I still can’t believe she did this to you.”

I finished the call with Kanica, unable to believe that Divya had been two-timing me. I called up Raveena for confirmation.

“Yes sir, I knew about this officer. He’s posted here itself. She met him in one of our parties. They used to have long calls on another cell phone,” she

said, “I’m sorry sir, but she made me promise not to tell you.”

“I understand what you’re saying Raveena, thanks!” I sighed, she was obviously a course-mate of Divya first, my friend/fellow officer later.

I was raging with anger by now. All those good times that we spent together in the last five months, came back to my mind. I wondered how/why I couldn’t see what was happening behind the scenes. She had been an amazing actor, and hadn’t flinched even a bit while accepting all the gifts showered on her recently. It’s true, love is ridiculously blind. Breaking up was still fine, but infidelity—unacceptable. I called her up immediately.

“Hi Siddhant, how are you?” she said from the other end, as if my world was how it always was.

“Who is this Chimri character, Divya?”

“He’s just an officer from another unit, my Mom asked me to meet him last week,” she said, and tried to cover up, “but who told you about him?”

“After all that I had done Divya, all that we had gone through.

This is what I get? You were two-timing me?”

“My love was true Siddhant, I was under pressure to start meeting others,” she exclaimed.

“So, you met him only last week?” I said angrily, hoping that at least now she tells the truth.

“Yes, but who told you his name?” she said, coming back to the same point.

“Goodbye Divya, this time for good,” I said and cut the call.

She obviously didn’t call back. There was nothing left to say.

I knew now that she was lying, but wasn’t angry anymore, just distraught and shattered. She had been lying all this while. I understood that she couldn’t be with me and eventually had to move on. However, why did she

have to start shortlisting and flirting with other officers, while still having all the lovey-dovey talks with me? What was the hurry? She might as well have started all this after we broke up. What was the hurry, really?

“It’ll all be fine Siddhant,” Mom said later, once I told her about the happenings.

“Yes mom, I know,” I said quietly, switching on my laptop.

“Forget about her, God is watching,” she said, “Forgive and forget.”

After a while, I went ahead and blogged the update; subtly mentioning about the betrayal without the details. I titled the blog as—“Sh\*t happens, Life goes on.”

“Sid, I read your blog,” Ravinder, my NDA course-mate from Kilo Squadron called up in the evening and said, “I had this gut feel that something was fishy.”

“Yeah well, it was shocking, but I’m fine now,” I said.

“Your blog was intentionally vague, tell me what happened,” he said with a concerned tone. I updated him with the turn of events.

“As far as I’m concerned, she’s dead,” I said, trying to say that to myself as well—repeatedly.

“Better be that way, and in case she calls to patch up after some time,” he said and continued with a noticeable smile in his voice, “remember—a poisonous snake remains poisonous even after it sheds its skin.”

“Oh, what a cruel misrepresentation of facts buddy,” I chuckled,

“I see your point though, and will be on my toes.”

After coming to know of the truth, I got a call from a number of YOs (and a few instructors of YO course), who congratulated me—

literally. It was nice to know that others cared. Some of them had discouraged me from taking it forward even in the initial days. From their perspective, this was the best thing to happen to me after the accident. For my blog readers, it was like a live story unraveling. Most of them said the same thing—I had gone through a lot worse already; life was only going to get better from here. So it was all for good.

Two weeks later, a news headline took the decision of IIM-A vs. ISB on my behalf. Because of a stay on implementation of some OBC quota, all IIMs (and other institutions) had to put their decisions on hold until further orders. My joining date at ISB

was April 15 th , barely ten days away. Essentially, it meant that I didn't have a choice anymore now. I had to either join ISB

and pay up for first half of the year on the first day, or take a chance and let go of my confirmed ISB seat to wait for the result of IIM-A.

“So what's the plan Siddhant?” Mom asked, looking at my worried expression, “you seemed more inclined towards IIM-A off late.”

“Well, I'm joining ISB on 15 th mom,” I said happily and pointed upwards, “he knows best.”

“Yes Siddhant,” Mom said with her lovely smile, “keep doing your hard work, and leave everything else to God.”

“Party's over, back to hard work bhaiya ,” Vanshika said, reading that article.

“Once everyone comes to know that you're leaving on 15 th , there'll be one see-off dinner/lunch at everyone's home, one by one,” Mom said going towards the phone.

“Good times,” I said remembering similar goodbye get-togethers at all relatives' homes during the NDA/Army days.

At night as I signed off for the day, my sub-conscious poked me.

“ Why don’t you message her that you’re joining ISB ,” the voice said from within. “ Just for old times’ sake, she’ll be happy to know. ”

Before I could consider this inner voice’s idea, another voice came up.

“ Are you crazy? She doesn’t care anymore and already has this Chimri guy in her life. ”

This matter was still not resolved and led to a cognitive dissonance of sorts. I still loved her and couldn’t digest the infidelity aspect of all this. Well, there was one side of me that was neutral—subconscious “N” and one that was against—

subconscious “Ag”.

“ Tell me this; if she knew that she was going to breakup this relationship in one month, why did she accept so many gifts gladly, even from Mom? Why did she not even try to oppose when you helped her buy the computer for her brothers? ” subconscious

“Ag” exclaimed angrily, firing the first volley of allegations.

“ I really don’t know, and probably never will, ” subconscious

“N” said, not having an answer to that question, “ maybe she didn’t realize that this was going to happen so soon. ”

“ Oh, is that so? Who timed it, pray tell me, and what about all those lovey-dovey talks with you, and at the same time talking to that a\*\* hole on another phone? ”

“ This will go on. Look at it this way buddy, ” subconscious “N”

said in a calm voice after a long pause, “ your love was true while it was there. The day she met this other officer for marriage, this ‘true love’ died. Everything that happened after that was more or less a facade. Just think from her perspective, she had been speaking to you because she loved you,

and no one can ‘ever’ take your place. At the same time, this person was the one whom she was going to marry, and had to spend her life with.

“What’s wrong with that? ”

“ Will you ever forget her; do you think she’ll ever forget you?

” subconscious “N” questioned uninterrupted as the opponent kept quiet. “ The one you had loved, died five months back. Your love was true Siddhant — it was true and pure while it was there. ”

“ Nevertheless, she could have waited, what was the hurry, really? ” subconscious “Ag” moved to another point.

“ You know it right? All the mental harassment her family was enforcing. But, she made sure that you have no tension on this front till your interview gets over.”

“Ag” was now much calmer, knowing that there was no “end-in-mind” of this argument.

“ There are so many things, probably not worth arguing. She might have some positives and lot of negatives. Maybe in the end it all evens out, ” subconscious “Ag” said sadly.

“ Yes it all evens out, ” my subconscious said as both “N” and

“Ag” merged back into one. “ Go ahead in your life with NO

feelings for Divya. If you miss her, you’ll be the only one getting hurt; she has moved on. If you hate her, she’ll still remain at the back of your mind. Don’t do that, be neutral, forget all feelings and let go. ”

I got up from my bed and opened up my private blog to make a note of all this. I consciously decided never to fall in love again, and never to let my guard down. “One cannot feel pain if he’s numb,” I wrote in the private blog, in line with the saying—“No girl, No pain.” It is easier said than done,

but I was now feeling much-much better and all set for the next innings—the MBA.

After a few days, I boarded the train to Hyderabad to join the ISB. A new era had begun, as I stepped into the portals of the corporate world.

“My fleet had fleeted through the storm, nothing that the Mind couldn’t tackle,

Sharpening the Saw was the modus operandi, to sail thru the forthcoming battle.”

### Life @ Civvy Street

The next morning I was at ISB Hyderabad. The grandeur and brilliance of the architecture and the ginormous main building was simply awe-inspiring. After entering, I saw many faces flying around the busy atmosphere, getting their documentation completed. I went to the first counter, received a file with my particulars and went to the next one. There was a lot of order in all this disorder and the crowd moved smoothly across the counters and the floors.

In the last one hour, I had run into a number of new joiners. The diverse profiles and experience levels were simply amazing. In the last counter for collecting books and some ISB branded stuff, I ran into the professor who had interviewed me.

“Hi Siddhant, good to see you here,” he said.

“Thank you sir, by the way I did read the book—Eats, Shoots & Leaves,” I said gleefully.

“That’s good, I read somewhere that you did get an inkling of making it that day,” he said with a sideways smile and a raised left eyebrow.

“Oh, you read my post on Pagalguy?” I said, a bit abashed in a way.

“Yes, we like to know what people are saying about us,” he said humbly, “welcome to ISB.”

“Thanks a lot sir,” I said, shaking his hand and bade him adieu.

After finishing off all the official work, it was time to go to my accommodation. My room was in SV 2— Student Village 2 . Well, the SV 2 was no village by any means. It had a tasteful design with a number of studio apartments (for married students) and four bedroom apartments (called quads ) for bachelors. The infrastructure of this institute didn’t cease to amaze me.

Everything including the greenery in the entire place, low-level pools in the common area of all SVs, to the awesome rooms, was fantabulous.

In the evening, the entire batch gathered in the atrium for an informal discussion with the alumni. A couple of them had come down for the Orientation week.

“... and that’s how some blue sky thinking can bring about a paradigm shift in your careers, with tangible differentiation,”

said one of the alums, looking at others if they wanted to add anything.

For the last one hour, they had been on and on with lot of info around what to focus on, their experience after passing out, the alumni spread across the globe and what not.

“Guys, don’t worry about all the management jargons you heard from us tonight,” one of the lady alums said to us, smiling away to her batch-mates, “by the time you pass out next year, you’ll be doing the same.”

There was a lot of hammering on the desks/clapping by the batch as we thought about what ‘d happen after we pass out from ISB.

“Wear your Section T-shirts every day for the next few days,” he said, “it will help in building some Section-spirit.”

After some time the group dispersed, and we all returned to our rooms.

“Siddhant, can I borrow your speakers,” Rohan, one of my three other quad-ies (roomies) asked. He was an IIT Mumbai grad, and had come with

considerable industry experience, like most of my batch-mates.

“Yup, you’re planning to add this to the huge music system you’ve set up outside?” I asked him, stepping into the lawn through my room’s walk-through sliding glass window (seriously, the rooms here were awesome).

“Additional sound always helps, eh!” Rohan said, straightening out the mêlée of wires.

“I’ve brought some goodies for the party guys,” Sahil my second quad-ie came in announcing, with a bag full of snacks and beer.

Sahil was one of the smartest guys I had come across in the batch, both in terms of looks and books.

“Great, Abhay has gone to invite others in the SV for the party, right?” I asked as Rohan tested the sound system. Abhay was our third quad-ie, an Indian, born and brought up in New Zealand.

“Yeah, he should be back in precisely five minutes, lest the captain opens fire,” Sahil exclaimed playfully.

“Hah Hah, I’m a stickler for punctuality but you’re taking it to the next level,” I said, giving him a friendly punch.

“Party time!” some voices exclaimed from outside as Rohan’s music got louder.

In the next few days, our orientation started with a few classes and an intersection treasure hunt in which we had to run through the expansive administrative buildings searching for clues. Then there were inter-section games, and plenty of other team building exercises with the aim of getting to know each other. It culminated with the last event on the last day of Orientation—

Talent night. By now, we knew our Section C batch-mates well, and the Section-spirit was already there.

I was going to sing along with two other section-types, a trio song—an old Hindi number. There was also a section group song planned. Somehow, I felt that I could probably add more value by singing a solo song as well. The challenge was that there was no time to arrange for an instrumentalist. Late evening, after changing into a decent dress for the performance, I left for the auditorium.

“Hi Nishit, have a minute?” I asked Nishit, who had volunteered from our batch to anchor the show. He had a heavy voice and an impressive Olympian personality; just right for hosting the show.

“Hi Siddhant, what’s up?” he asked, gathering a set of papers.

“Can you put my name for a solo song somewhere in that list, if it isn’t too late?” I asked him, hoping this last minute request for a slot will not affect his plan much.

“Yeah sure,” he said looking at his list, “anyone playing an instrument?”

“Not quite,” I said smiling a confident smile, “I’m banking on the audience to give me the beats with their claps.”

“I’m assuming,” Nishit said looking up, wondering whether this would be a good idea, “you’ve done this before a large audience; which song?”

“Yup, I’ve sung in Army parties,” I said with surety, “I’ll sing Kishore Kumar’s—‘ Kehna Hai .’ ”

I had sung in a couple of Army parties before, but there hadn’t been a situation where there were no instruments. Nevertheless, I knew that I could do this well.

“It’s risky, but if you pull it off, that’ll be awesome,” Nishit said adding my name to the list. “You’ll go at no. 5, immediately after Section A’s skit. All the best!”

I thanked him and stepped out for a quick rehearsal. Yes, there was a risk—the crowd not clapping, or breaking the rhythm, which

in fact might be a deterrent for a good performance. I asked my section-mates to make sure that they address at least the former, and left the latter to improvisation .

An hour later, it was time and Nishit came on the stage to announce my name.

“...we now move on to a solo performance by Siddhant Mishra, our very own Army man,” Nishit said with a pause, as the audience clapped.

“He’s going to sing a Kishore Kumar song—‘ Kehna Hai ’ from the Hindi movie Padosan ,” he continued, “he’s going to sing without drums or guitar. The song needs the audience’s support with claps, so I hope we can count on you guys, and we can have a fantastic performance.”

There was some whistling from the audience, probably from my section-mates.

“Ladies and Gentleman,” he announced with a pause and turned towards the entry point, “we have Siddhant Mishra.”

The hall echoed with thunderous clapping and encouraging hooting, as I walked on to the center of the stage, smiling my best smile ever. Thankfully, the mike was already on the stand, so my left hand was essentially free for any movements as necessary. I had also switched on the recording on my phone in the pocket, (just in case the common video recording is corrupted).

“This goes out for all of us, who have ever fallen in love,” I said looking across the span of my audience.

“Ohhhhh!” some people cheered in unison.

“No band, no guitar,” I said, pausing for a second, “just me and YOU.”

The hall erupted into a loud applause, and this was definitely a morale booster.

“ Kehna hai, Kehna hai ...” I started signing.

“Kehna hai, Kehna hai, aaj tumse, yeh pehli baar . . .” I continued as some people started to clap, but rather in a disorganized way.

“Ho oh, tum hi, toh layi ho . . .” I started waving my hands up and down with a rhythm. My section-mates caught on with a rhythmic clapping and slowly the entire crowd joined in as well.

The song carried on well and the synchronization of clapping did break down across the hall at some times but thankfully, I maintained the rhythm at my end. At one point of time, I had a noticeable smile as Sahil came into the auditorium from the door at the top, waving his hand. Many people turned around. Judging

my changed expression and the lyrics they probably expected the “gal in my life” standing there (sure, as if life was a romantic movie with a happy-ending, huh!).

“Thank you,” I said in the end and walked back waving to the crowd.

The deafening roar of clapping and “Section C” chants filled the hall with energy and ebullience. My performance seemed to be a success, and I thanked God after coming out. The rest of the evening was splendid with some mind-blowing performances by the batch—tabla players, classical singers, guitarists, dancers, superb actors and what not. This really was a talented batch. The night ended with the award going to another Section.

The next day our classes started officially. The classrooms were ginormous and my seat was in the last row as per alphabetical order (which was good). There was a nametag in front of my desk saying “Siddhant Mishra.” On seeing the tag, I felt some mixed emotions internally. There was no rank—that was sad, but then with God’s grace I did achieve something at an entirely different level, so it was all fine. In the middle of an Economics class, I stepped out for a cup of coffee from the dispenser right outside.

“Thank God they have these dispensers,” one of my classmates who had just filled his cup said as I came closer, “I was so sleepy.”

“The Professor is awesome, but the topic is so boring,” I said rubbing my eyes, “the best part is that they allow us to take coffee inside.”

“Yeah, let’s go back and put some ACP,” he said jovially.

ACP or “Arbit CP,” or “Arbitrary Class Participation” was probably the most common acronym across all B-schools in the world. It originated from the fact that one gets marks for participating in class discussions (ideally the CP is supposed to be around the topic being discussed; ideally though). There were variations of this of course—DCP for “Desperate CP” or ICP for

“Infinite CP” where students used to go on in a monologue, eating up all airtime. MBA was fun in its own way.

In the evening, after having my first group-meet post dinner, it was time for another party. This was a combined party for the entire batch in one of the SVs.

“Beer for you, Captain?” Sahil asked, bringing a couple of beers from the makeshift bars on one side.

“Thanks buddy,” I said, taking one bottle.

“Let’s see how long we can continue this party routine every week,” he said, looking at the crowd.

“Things are going to get crazy in a few days,” I said, looking at my wristwatch “I haven’t even started on the assignments yet.”

“But let’s deal with that later,” I continued, and had another gulp, “let’s party tonight.”

“Yeah, full on.”

Music was in the air with people shaking their legs on one side, and busy chatting on the other. The party atmosphere was awesome.

After two hours of booze and dancing, some of us went to the swimming pool to dunk one of the birthday boys of our Section C.

After dunking the birthday boy, the throwers started focusing on others around as well. While I was seeing all this frolicking, my mind was already having some discussions deep inside.

“Look at that water dude, why don’t you jump? But then, how will you swim?”

“Well, with one hand and backstroke maybe. You won’t know unless you try, right?”

“But, is it worth it?”

The questions went on, while I started moving towards the edge.

Finally the last closing thought came in. “Yes, I’m sure it is worth it!”

“Hey guys, me too,” I said to my section-mates, who were picking up and throwing others.

“Are you sure Captain?” one of them asked.

“You bet,” I said happily, as they sprung at the opportunity.

Splash!

There I was, finally in a swimming pool (with all clothes on of course) after three long years. I had never cherished being in a swimming pool as much as I was enjoying now, right now. I felt alive and free, throwing a few backstrokes with the left hand and staying afloat. I thanked life for where I had reached today, from where I was a few years back on that hospital bed.

Half an hour later, we were back to the gathering where people were still partying. I took another drink and moved to the dance floor. I was in a partially inebriated state and looked up into the sky. For a moment, it felt as though there was no one else around, just the stars and me. Suddenly a slow romantic song came up which brought back memories of yonder years.

“ Woh lamhe, Woh baate koi na jaane, ” the song started, while many people started humming and slow-dancing along. It was a beautifully sung number by Atif Aslam, one of my favorite singers and came from a movie that was released during the time of my

hospitalization. I had sung it to her many times on the cellphone, while we remembered the good old times together.

“This is for you Divya,” I said aloud, raising the glass towards the sky, “Cheers to what we had!”

I sang along the rest of the song and poured my heart out.

However, the memories of betrayal and breakup came haunting back.

That night I sang and drunk her out of my body, and out of my mind.

Next morning I woke up on my bed and opened my dreary eyes to realize that I had thrown up on my floor at night. I did have a vague memory of walking back with others, discussing how it’s better to be single than being in love. It seems I had now puked her out of my system physically as well. In two hours or so, I was back to the class, trying to grasp subjects, some of which were still German to me. When I came back to my room after lunch that day, the room was all “spic and span,” thanks to the housekeeping staff.

A few days later, IIM-A results came out—finally, and I did make it through.

“Congratulations Siddhant,” Sahil said in the evening, “so what are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know, I may prefer to study here,” I said deep in thought, partially sure about that.

“That will be good news for us,” he said, looking at my e-mail with the offer letter, “but If I was in your place, I would have probably joined A.”

“Yeah well, I’m so in love with this place that it’s clouding my decisions. I’ll sit on this for a while and decide,” I said with a pensive look frozen on

my face.

“Take your time Captain, it’s a big decision,” he said.

Over the next four days, I discussed with some of my batch-mates, friends, and few officers who had done an MBA from other good B-schools.

“Dude, come on IIM-A is IIM-A,” most of them stated without any doubt.

It made sense, I had just entered the corporate world and still malleable from that perspective. Two years of strenuous education at “A” would lay a more solid foundation. I spoke to the Professors as well, and (even though it meant one unfilled empty seat) they too felt that in my case, IIM-A was the right place to be. I made the call and decided to join IIM-A.

“So you’re leaving us this weekend Siddhant?” one of my batch-mates came in and asked the next day, while all of us quad-ies sat together in a huddle, drinking beer.

“Yeah, decided finally, leaving this Sunday,” I said, increasing the volume of the song in the background.

“So rest of the week he’ll just come to the classes for fun, and not worry about assignments and CPs,” Rohan chuckled.

“Yeah that’s the intention,” I said, happily.

“By the way, how much are they refunding?” Sahil pitched in, grabbing another beer can.

“Except for the sunk cost of ‘admission confirmation’ and the money spent on books, electricity and other expenses on me, they’ve agreed to refund almost everything else; and that’s awesome,” I said delightfully.

“They’ve been really considerate that way,” he said.

“Also, our Economics professor had taught this in the first class. Ideally, sunk cost should not be considered while making a rational decision,” I said, munching on some roasted cashew nuts.

“Well said!” someone chirped aloud, raising his can for cheers , and we followed suit.

“Let’s take a group photo. I’ll miss you guys,” I said, getting up to take a click.

That night, I published another blog post on why I made this decision and put it on Pagalguy as well. I mentioned clearly that my decision was case specific (the providential disclaimer), based on my own priorities. Thereon, whenever someone asked me the question, I gave them the link or asked them to google—“my name, ISB, IIM-A,” to get the link.

In the next few days, I took plenty of pictures—with group-mates, section-mates and many good friends made over the last few weeks.

I was definitely going to miss these three weeks at ISB, the batch, the faculty and the way of life. On the last day, I signed off my last blog from here, putting in black and white—

Class of 2008 rocks! ISB rocks!

IIM-A Class of 2009, here I come!

The Coveted Zone

A month later, I landed up at Ahmedabad railway station. I could already feel the familiar Gujarati whiff in the air (from the good old YO days).

“Management,” I said to the auto driver, as per the advice given in one of the PG forums.

The driver said something in Gujarati and indicated me to sit down. Apparently, “Management” was the key word, and auto drivers just knew where to go. Half an hour later, I was at the gates of IIM-Ahmedabad. This place was in the middle of the city. On crossing the gate, I saw the proverbial Harvard Steps on the right hand side—the entrance to the main building. An hour later, I was sitting in my “new room” in Dormitory 9, or Dorm-9. Well, it was in no way close to the five-star room I had in ISB. But

that was just fine, some of the greatest minds of the country had probably studied in this room. In the afternoon while I was unpacking, there was a knock at the door.

“Hi, I’m Mayank,” a guy said with a Bengali accent, as I opened the door.

“Hi Mayank I’m Siddhant, are you staying in the basement as well?” I asked, welcoming him inside.

He was the first dorm cum batch-mate that I had met today. He came with an IIT degree, and one year of work experience. We had a quick round of chitchat and went towards the Mess for lunch.

“Some experience you’ve had Captain,” Mayank said looking at me sideways, “very inspiring.”

“Thanks buddy, it all happened JLT, just like that.”

“Sure,” he said smiling, “give me the link to your blog.”

“Yup,” I said, as we reached the Mess, “that’s the canteen I guess. Any idea how many have come from the batch for the preparatory classes?”

“Not really,” he said, “It’ll be good to get used to this atmosphere before the course begins formally. I guess rest of the batch would join after a couple of weeks.”

“Yeah, and I definitely need this ‘orientation’ towards the concept of studying,” I said and then couldn’t help but reiterate the fact, “I’ve been trained to sleep in classes.”

“I can imagine you saying that to the Professors, Captain,”

Mayank said smiling away.

Rest of the day went off well, and we met a few other preppies (those who had come for the few weeks of preparatory classes).

Our rooms were across both the old campus and new campus (separated by an underground tunnel). In the evening, I called up Mom & Vanshika, and gave them the updates.

From the next day our classes started. These began at 0800hrs in the morning, and evenings were generally free. All the preppies got together after dinner in the beautiful lawns of the famous LKP—Louis Kahn Plaza, where the night-lights falling on the garden created a heavenly effect. This time, we had heard, was the only time one gets to enjoy at IIM-A and not worry about studies. One of the evenings, I got a call from one of my fellow Pagalguy friends.

“Hi Siddhant sir, we’ve got the results from the voting,” he said excitedly. “You are one of the ten people whose flight ticket is being sponsored for the AIPGM—All India Pagalguy Meet.”

“That’s awesome, thanks buddy,” I replied gladly, “It’s on the next weekend, right?”

A few months back, while planning was on for the annual get together, everyone had to write on one forum thread—“What PG

means to you.” It was not really a competition, but essentially a way to decide who would get the sponsorship. I would have definitely attended this meet—one way or the other.

“Yes, next Sat & Sun, I hope there won’t be any clash with your classes.”

“Well, we have an extra class on Saturday,” I said, looking at my schedule, “but, I’ll be there.”

“That’s great, looking forward to see you in person sir,” he said happily.

On the next weekend, I flew off to Mumbai. It wasn’t that difficult to recognize each other in the crowd. We were all wearing white T-shirts that said “Certified Pagal.” After a while, we took a Ferry to Alibaug beach. After the initial intros of the Pagal-guys and gals, I ran into the creator of PG (whose user name was providentially, ‘Pagalguy’).

“Hi Siddhant, it’s an honor to meet you,” he said, thoughtfully extending his left hand instead of right.

“The honor’s all mine,” I said humbly, “it’s great to meet the person who conceptualized something as wonderful as this group.”

“Yeah well,” he said, looking at the crowd, “who would have thought that most of them are actually meeting each other for the first time.”

The bonhomie by virtue of being part of this virtual family was evident in the air. That night after a lot of singing and dancing, we went off to the beach. It was an open starry moonlit night, and as the discussions died down, the sound of ocean brought in tranquility and peace of mind. As I lay on the beach looking at the stars, I thanked God immensely for everything he

had given me. I really did want to make an impact even if only a trifle, in everyone’s lives and do justice to this second life.

Next day I returned to IIM-A, and life was back to normal. Our Preparatory classes were going to finish in a few days. Mom and Vanshika were arriving on Sunday morning.

On Friday evening, I got a call from a reporter asking for a short interview. We couldn’t talk much but I asked him to meet me in our café in the afternoon next day.

“Thanks for taking out time Capt. Siddhant,” he said, “I’m Maneesh, and I work for the Times of India.”

“Hi Maneesh, sure,” I said smiling, as we entered the café premises, “please have a seat.”

“I came across your profile on Social Media, and just wanted to share your story with everyone,” he said excitedly, as I ordered some coffee. “By the way, why is this called TANSTAAFL café?”

“It stands for ‘There Ain’t No Such Thing As A Free Lunch,’ ” I said, waving back to one of the preppies, as we promptly received our piping hot cup of coffee.

“Basically,” I continued with a grin, “if you’re whiling away your time in the café, it might come at the cost of good marks, i.e.—get back to studies.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize that it has such an intense meaning,”

Maneesh chuckled and took out a small voice recorder.

“So let us begin,” he said. In about an hour or so, most of the questions were over.

“So what is the one thing you learnt from your parents?” he asked, continuing the stream of questions.

“From my Mom,” I said without an iota of doubt, “resilience and ‘smiling on the face of adversity’, and from Dad, whatever I remember of him—humility. He’s one of the most humble people I’ve met to date, and my role model from that perspective.”

“I can imagine,” he said, and continued after taking a deep breath, “I understand that you had the blessings of your parents, well-wishers and did all the hard work.”

“But where do you get this indomitable spirit from?” he said folding his hands into a fist, and stressing on the point, “this spirit to fight against all odds?”

“Factually speaking, everything that happened after I gained consciousness, just happened,” I said deep in thought, looking

back in time over the last few years, “when you fall, you just get up and move on.”

“I guess this attitude of never giving up was imbibed during my NDA days,” I continued, trying to structure my thought, “It’s difficult to explain

in words, but if you could imagine one's DNA being molded and redesigned, that would be it."

"What an analogy, but I got your point," he exclaimed cheerfully,

"I remember seeing the modified version of one movie dialogue in your blog—Sh\*t Happens, Life goes on and on."

"Oh, you've read my blog?" I asked, as we came towards the end of the interview and got up.

"Yes sir, I'm one of your fans," he said amusedly, "and you're quite humble yourself."

"Have you seen the movie 'Men-in-black-1?'" I asked him, remembering something and he nodded.

"Remember the last scene when they start to zoom out the camera from the city, then the Earth, Solar System..." I continued.

"Then out to the Milky Way galaxy," Maneesh added on, remembering the scene, "then it turns out that our Galaxy is just one of several marbles to play with, for another life form."

"Exactly, makes one feel kind-of small in the big scheme of things, doesn't it?" I asked with a wink and continued after a long pause, "we're all made up of the same five elements, six if you are a Martian." Maneesh smiled.

"It's just surprising how some people manage to have huge egos and heaps of arrogance," I concluded.

"Humility is the virtue of enlightened souls. On another note, I read your recent blog on 'Game Theory of Life,' " he said, visibly happy about remembering it at the right moment. We started walking towards the gate.

"If I remember correctly, the Game theory says that—if you know your competitor's strategy, work towards maximizing your profits.

If you don't know your competitor's strategy, try to minimize your losses."

“Yes precisely, by the same token, Life is iffy. We never know when it might pull the plug (we don’t know opponent’s strategy), so we should live and enjoy every moment to its fullest (minimize losses),” I said, remembering what went through my mind when I blogged it up.

“But I guess, that’s a different conversation altogether,” I said snapping my finger, and getting out of that chain of thought.

“Yeah that’s true,” he agreed, “any closing one liner?”

“Well,” I paused for a moment, “Enjoy this moment—this, this very moment. Live today, as if there’s no tomorrow.”

On the way to the gate, he took a quick profile photograph in the LKP lawn, and left the campus. Mom and Vanshika were arriving in the morning tomorrow. I quickly checked their guest room, which was in one of the girls’ dorms adjacent to my Dorm 9.

Next day morning, I picked up the newspaper to see the headlines before leaving for the railway station, and got a pleasant surprise. There I was on the front page of Sunday Times (bottom half). The title of the article was —“He lost the war, but won the battle” and the caption of my photo said, “Siddhant Mishra at the Louis Kahn Plaza.” I smiled a long smile, kept the paper down, and picked it up again. I closed my eyes, thanked God, quickly wrapped the paper, and left for the railway station.

“Hi Mom, Hi Vanshika,” I exclaimed, as they stepped out of the train.

“Hi Siddhant,” Mom said and gave a nice motherly hug.

“Hi bhaiya , finally we get to meet you,” Vanshika said, as I brought down their luggage.

“So your boss gave you leave, or you just vanished without a trace?” I asked her. Vanshika had just completed her engineering and joined an IT company.

“I’ll go with the latter,” she shrugged away the thought of her boss. As soon as we boarded our cab, I took out the newspaper.

“Welcome to Ahmedabad,” I said and handed them a copy each of the Sunday Times.

Mom looked at me quizzically, and Vanshika was the first to see the news item below.

“Mom, look at this,” she said exuberantly, as the driver tried to see in the rear view mirror what was happening.

“Wow,” Mom exclaimed and quickly glanced through the article,

“we’re so proud of you Siddhant. God bless you!”

“Thank you Mom,” I said, and touched her feet once again.

“Congratulations bhaiya ,” Vanshika said, reading it through,

“another treat is due.”

“Yeah sure, right after your ‘first job’ treat,” I chuckled, glad that I was able to make them happy, “well it’s not that big a deal, just another news item after all.”

“Come on bhaiya , stop being modest. Let’s get more copies of today’s newspaper.”

“You both have the blessings of your Dad, all our elders and God,” Mom said, keeping her hands on both of us, “you will do wonderful things in life.”

“Thank you Mom,” we said in unison and the cab proceeded towards the campus.

I got some kudos from other preppies as well and a lot of good-wishes from relatives and friends. The article had come out in most of the editions across the country. The next two-three days, we had a great time and I showed

them a few places in and around Ahmedabad. The day after they left, I got a call from the Media Cell of IIM-A.

“Siddhant, will you be in the campus tomorrow?” the Public Relations Officer (PRO) asked.

“Yes, I’ll be here,” I said, wondering what had happened.

“I got a call from NDTV, CNN IBN, and a few other channels. They want to do a story on you,” he said. “What would be a good time, 10a.m.?”

“That would be just fine,” I said, still dazed with the turn of events.

Next day the campus was full of a swarm of faces, with the rest of our batch arriving. Most of the preppies were helping them out with the formalities. At around 10am, I stepped out of one of the classes where my batch was filling up forms. The camera operators were waiting in the Library area, right next to the classes.

“Hello Capt. Siddhant, the crew has almost arrived,” a smart reporter came forward and said.

“Sure, when can we start,” I asked, while the crew was setting up their cameras. I was in a formal striped blue shirt and a light shaded trouser.

“Another 5mins, we just need to do a couple of things first,” he said, looking around at other students going about their routine.

“We’ll first do it in English, and then in Hindi. We also need one of your friends to say a few words about you. Can we take a few shots in the class as well?”

“Okay, I’ll arrange for that,” I said and went back to the classes.

“Hey Anmol, you have 10-15 minutes?” I asked one of the preppies.

“Sure Captain, tell me,” he said. Anmol was one of my good pals amongst the preppies. He was a smart fellow and it so happened that we shared the same birthday as well.

“Great, they want someone to talk about me,” I said with a sly grin, “essentially speak ‘good’ words about me.”

“Come on captain,” Anmol said, shrugging off the last part,

“there are, but only good words for you.”

I requested him to inform a few preppies to gather in a class after a while, for some small shots. Some of the camera operators were actually following me all this while, and taking random videos. I sat down in a corner sidewall with Anmol, while we thought about what we were going to say.

Apparently, there wasn’t going to be any retake. Shortly thereafter, it was time for the interview and the reporter started with the intro statement, with the mike in hand, looking towards the camera.

“Capt. Siddhant, what was your first reaction when you gained consciousness?” he asked intently, turning towards me. I went back in time for a millisecond, and spoke.

“I did a quick visual check; except for the right shoulder, everything else was there,” I said and continued without a pause, as if there was a running train to catch. “My legs were there, I could see, I could hear, I could smell a few bouquets of flowers, everything was just fine.”

I finally paused for a while, and continued.

“So I just said what first came to my mind—can I have a chocolate milkshake?” I paused again as the memories came back, “and I believe that toned down the tension in the room in a way, and made people smile.”

There were a couple of more questions after that. I did convey that being an Ex-NDA, for doing an MBA in India, I had to aim for the best—IIMs or ISB. Anmol also said a couple of good things about me.

At night, I went to the second floor, which had a TV and put on NDTV at 8p.m. sharp. In a few minutes, my story came and I switched on the video of my cell phone with a smile.

“Hello Siddhant,” one of my maternal uncles called up, as my story finished, “we’re proud of you.”

“Thank you ‘mamaji,’ ” I said, “this is all thanks to the blessings and love from all of you.”

“You’ll do great in life Siddhant, we’ve also recorded the news here,” he said and paused, “you must be getting more calls now, so I’ll hang up.”

The next call was from Mom and Vanshika, then other relatives/friends, and I spent the next two hours entirely on the phone.

The next day I received some more calls, comments on the blog and a number of e-mails from across the country. I did wonder where they got my e-mail id from; anyway, that was fine.

Apart from this feeling of achieving something compared to where I was, there was this deep sense of “making an impact.” Even if a small fraction of people, get inspired and decide not to get bogged down by the iffy idiosyncrasies of life, I would do justice to this second life. At night, I penned down my next blog on these few minutes of fame. Before sleeping, a voice spoke in my mind.

“Buddy, congrats you’ve achieved ‘something big.’ But guess what, that’s done and dusted.”

“Cut some slack dude,” a second voice in my head protested, “few years back, you barely made it out of the clutches of death — that too in bits and pieces.”

“Yeah well, I agree — Kudos for that. However, everyone here in your batch is an achiever in some way,” the first voice replied.

“Till now, you hadn’t thought beyond making through to IIM-A/ISB, so dude what’s next?”

“What next? ” the other voice replied, after a pause, “ Well, there are only months and months of slogging. As far as choosing the Industry/Company is concerned, let’s cross the bridge when we get to it. ”

### Epitome Of Stress

Next day we had our first day of classes. I climbed up towards the last row (alphabetically S came towards the end), looking at the nametags affixed in front of all tables.

“Captain, you’re in the ‘well,’ ” a voice called out.

It was Akhilesh, one of my dorm-mates sitting in the first row.

Since all other rows were in an ascending order of height (at each step), the first row—closest to the instructor in effect became a semicircular depression—the “well.”

“Don’t tell me,” I exclaimed, stepping down and coming forward.

There were three columns in all—left, right, and center (from where the instructor stands). My seat was—center column, first row, right in the middle.

“Center of attraction, huh,” I said to him, “we’ll be the first line of attack for the professors.”

“Yeah well, that’s the way the cookie crumbles,” Akhilesh said, as the professor came in and the class settled down.

“So, welcome to IIM-Ahmedabad everyone,” the professor said with a pleasant smile, keeping a file he was carrying, on the table.

He turned around swiftly towards the wall clock.

“Right in line,” he said, comparing with the time on his wristwatch, “the time by my watch is three past nine. Respect everybody’s time and never be late.”

We all looked down at our watches, some changing the time and others just looking at it JLT.

“I see that you’re all well prepared and have done your analysis.

So, what should Mohan do?” the professor asked, looking at the right flank of the class.

“ How do we know what Mohan should do — you tell us,” I thought (probably most of us thought). Our heads dipped down into the case mat—case study material, as he came closer towards our seats. This was a class on Human Resource Management—HRM, and this Mohan guy was some Factory Manager in this case study. Two guys suddenly entered the class hurriedly with their books.

“You’re too early,” the professor snapped, as they froze at their places, midway to the seats.

“We’re sorry sir, got late.”

“You’re too early for the next class,” he said sternly, and turned towards the rest of us.

They moved closer towards the door but kept standing, hoping that he’ll get over it and let them sit. After a few seconds, he turned around and saw that they were still standing.

“Am I hallucinating?” he removed his spectacles, cleaned them with his hanky, put them back on simpering in a sadistic way and asked, “or are you still standing there?”

The atmosphere got tense, as they left the class and we dug our heads back into our case-mats.

“They were asked to read the case study and prepare for the class, right?” he asked the TA—the Teaching Assistant. This was the lady who was going to note our class participation and stuff.

She nodded, and he turned towards us once again.

“So,” he glanced with piercing eyes, across the sea of faces.

Well thankfully, the Professor didn’t do any cold calling and after a couple of people spoke, things were just fine. The message was however clear. Going forward, for every class, we were supposed to prepare for the case study after going through

the entire material—before the class. In most of the instances, these case studies had a number of exhibits that ran into 20-25

pages. The authors must be getting paid based on the number of pages printed. Phew!

The second year guys returned from their summer internships a few days later. They were called the Tuchchas/Tuchchis , and us first year ones were the Fachchas/Fachchis . In fact, this was contradictory with respect to the meaning of Tuchcha in Hindi.

Over the next few days, we got a lot of “gyan” on their experiences in I-banks, top-notch consulting firms, Marketing firms and what not. There was also “gyan” on “how-to-survive-the-first-semester,” and the rest of the first year. No wonder, they were the Gods for all practical purposes, having completed the PGP 1 st year successfully.

“The adage goes,” one of our basement Tuchchas was telling a few of us one day.

“If you survive the 1 st semester, rest of 2 nd and 3 rd would only be marginally tougher. If you survive the 1 st year my friends, rest of your life would be a walk in the park.”

“That was a good one,” I said, thinking how that was just in line with my NDA days. The first three terms were one of the toughest ones. At the end of the sixth term, we had supposedly conquered the world (or so it seemed at that point of time).

“Today, we’re having our dorm naming ceremony,” one of the other dorm Fachchas mentioned.

“Oh yes, and don’t worry, Dorm 9 or Cloud 9 is known as the Gentlemen’s Dorm,” the Tuchcha said, visibly happy. “At least the names you get wouldn’t be as embarrassing...”

“As embarrassing as...” I asked as he paused, “as it could be?”

“You got that right,” he said with half a grin, “I’ll leave it to your dorm-baap to give the details.”

The dorm-baap (dorm-daddy) was a pseudo name for the Dormitory representative from the 2nd year. For all practical purpose, he was the one we were to go to for all admin issues. In the evening, all of us gathered in the top floor. All Fachchas had to share a story, and our future dorm names were going to be given by the Tuchchas based on that.

It was good fun no doubts—the hearing part that is, especially for the ones whose turn was over. At the end of it all, the Tuchchas went into a huddle and came back after an hour or so.

Then the “dorm naming ceremony” started.

“Captain let’s start with you,” the dorm-baap said grinning away and asked me to sit down on one knee.

He took out a piece of paper and started reciting an entertaining oath, while pouring water on my head from a bucket with the other hand. This was more or less like baptism in its own unique way.

Other Fachchas couldn’t help but smile away to glory, on what was going to happen to them as well.

“By the powers vested in me by the Godly Tuchchas , you would henceforth be known as,” he said and paused for a cinematic effect.

“RiFle—with a capital R and capital F,” he shouted, as everyone cheered and clapped merrily.

“Since he was in the Army, we tried to keep the name as close to that as possible,” he continued, “this name was derived from...”

He went on to tell everyone, the way they came up with “RiFle”—with a capital R and capital F.

“So this is the CCCF behind his name,” he said finishing off.

CCCF stood for—“Conceptual Clarity Contextual Familiarity,” which in this case was essentially the logic behind the name.

“Your name’s CCCF is a heavily guarded secret and to be shared only within the Dorm—across the batches,” he cautioned us jovially.

The dorm naming ceremony finished late early morning. All the ten Fachchas in Dorm 9 now had new names—FeeBo, BOLT, ElJo, Osho, Amool, Scuba, FuGli, Syler, LinDow and RiFle (me).

A few days later, I rushed into the classroom after a good breakfast, just as the professor came in. He was a tall bespectacled gentleman with a French beard. The gray in his hairs spoke well of all the stories we had heard about his expertise in Micro Finance and the likes. His pensive eyes augured well with the stories of many students (who came without preparing for the case study) being shot with machine gun burst fire. The subject was MANAC—Management Accounting or “Maniac” as it was popularly known as, in the campus (for obvious reasons).

“So, let us straightaway get down to some cold calling,” he said, smirking at the class.

We shifted in our places, and by default, all the eyes went down to the books.

“Why do all of you have your heads down like newlywed brides?” he asked with a wicked smile.

There was humor in the statement, but no one dared to smile.

“Most often the front row guys get caught, so let’s have some volunteers in front of the board from the other rows.”

I heaved a sigh of relief, and started reading the case once again. My mind drifted and imagined a prairie with a vulture circling around a set of carcass, going around in circles and circles. The vulture had many options, but he was looking intently for the one that was the most enticing.

“But then, what if all the professors think like that, and our folks in the ‘well’ get left out?” he continued, with a dramatic worried expression and hands on the chin. Suddenly, the vulture stopped circling and took a straight dive down. I now had the tall figure standing right in front of me, looking through his spectacles with the look of oh-you’re-so-gone-now.

“Can we have the ‘Certified Pagal’ please do the honors?”

I cursed myself for wearing the Pagalguy T-shirt today, of all the days. He must have already decided his potential targets as soon as he entered the class. I went to the board and wrote some calculations for the question asked at the end of the case study.

After some scribbling on the board, I turned around.

“Ready, aim, fire” I heard the orders to a firing squad somewhere in my mind, while I stood as the target.

“Do you think this is right Siddhant?” he asked intently. I looked at the board, to buy out some more time. After analyzing (at least showing that I was) what I had written, I gave my answer.

“No sir,” was the meek but firm response, and I continued in a complaining tone, “Something is wrong with these ‘indirect costs.’ ”

Sure, as if the poor indirect costs themselves were the culprits.

But he looked at me, seemingly pleased that I could at least point one mistake and turned towards the class to catch the next person. Apparently, the staying awake yesterday night while we were discussing this in the group meet, actually helped to an extent. After classes, we headed towards the Mess for lunch. In a few minutes, there was a commotion outside.

“Maniac quiz guys, run for your lives,” a few Tuchchas shouted grinning away.

I quickly finished the lunch (as did all the others), and went closer towards the notice board. There it was—a simple piece of paper, fluttering with the hot air of tension and terror surrounding it. The golden words said—“Please note that there

will be a short MANAC-1 Quiz today (Friday) at 2.30 p.m. in respective classrooms .”

Well, the ribbon cutting was over, as the first surprise quiz finished somehow. A sea of smiles came out of the classroom, not sure of what they'd just gone through. We knew now what to expect going forward —“the unexpected.”

There was hardly any time to think about anything but studies, but occasionally the mind did take a walk down the untrodden path of what-if. Science fiction always fascinated me, especially the concept of alternate realities and parallel universes (like the one in the movie—“The One”). Maybe right now, in some other parallel universe (in present continuous tense), the accident hasn't taken place, we are married and are probably posted in the same station as well. In some other parallel universe, we might have gone separate ways right after the accident and life is a tad different. Who knows, really? I wish functions of MS Office suite worked on Life, and things were as simple as pressing “Ctrl

+ Z” to undo the accident that changed everything. Nevertheless, I pressed the pause button on my imagination and looked at the supply demand curve in the Microeconomics book, for a quick reality check. I had a bigger spiritual purpose—do justice to this second life by spreading positive vibes all around. I went ahead and penned down a small poem on my blog:

“Dear ‘Life,’

You took me up you brought me down, when the ship broke up, you said — ‘Do NOT drown.’

I carried on I swam along, evinced tenacity made up an imbuing song.

I won't give up 'Life,' I won't let go; You taught me so, and for that, I do bow.

You may again raze my ship 'Life,' or becloud every dawn, All I would say is — 'Sh\*t happens and Life goes on.' "

Few weeks had passed and daily group meets that extended much beyond the proverbial ungodly hours was commonplace. There were five of us in our group with four guys and one gal. Ours was Group #1—Nishant Singhal (a.k.a. ToTTi), Dheeraj Kumar (a.k.a.

AsLi), Arpana Birla (a.k.a. 3P), Ankit Dutta (a.k.a. Homo) and I (a.k.a. RiFle).

"So, who's taking up what tonight?" Dutta asked, as the last person came into my room one day. We used to have the group meets in one of our rooms, or sometimes in the Library or LKP lawn.

Every day, each one of us used to read the case study or chapter for one of the subjects, and give a briefing to others. There was no other way that it was humanly possible to prepare for all the subjects, the next day.

"AsLi you take up Finance, Captain—Marketing, 3P—HR," ToTTi continued, looking at the timetable, "Dutta Microeconomics and I'll take up QM."

ToTTi was a clean-cut smart guy and our Section B Class Representative as well. He was fond of planning and organizing things. 3P was an ever-chirpy bright Bengali gal, always having a smile to spare. AsLi was a Finance focused guy right from the beginning, and Dutta (another Bengali) was the most studious amongst us.

"Sounds good," I said, picking up the Marketing case study and Kotler book, "let's discuss at around 12."

I started a slow instrumental music by Yanni on my laptop and thus began our ordeal. After a few hours, there was a knock on the door.

“Hey Captain,” Hemant Jain (a.k.a. Phattu), one of our section-types announced and came inside. “Oh, you guys are still in a meeting.”

Phattu was a smart bespectacled guy from Delhi. He was earlier working with Ashok Leyland, which also supplies many military trucks. That brought in the commonality factor as well.

“How dare you walk into our secret meeting Mr. Phattu?” ToTTi asked, smiling naughtily.

“Yeah well, Captain here’s your book,” he said, keeping one of my ISB books on the shelf.

“Now that you are here, we might as well order tea from the café,” I said picking up the internal campus phone and continued.

“As per our group-tradition, you will pick the tab.”

“Sure Captain, you mean the tradition you’ve just created?” He chuckled and settled down on my bed. “Feel free to add it to your ‘accounts receivable’ list.”

I made the call, ordered for two cups of tea, four cups of coffee and six plates of chicken Maggi from the café.

“By the way, how are you feeling after the QM quiz results today?” AsLi asked.

“That negative marking concept is an albatross around the neck,”

3P said.

“The professor spoke so happily,” Dutta said, modulating his voice, “I’m stunned by the intellectual inferiority of you guys.”

“Hah Hah, Yes, and this time I got lucky,” I shared happily, “I attempted only one and instead of putting the wrong answer, left the remaining four questions unanswered.”

In our QM quiz, the professor had told us—“Don’t attempt guesswork, write an answer only if you’re sure it’s right. Else, face the wrath of negative marking.”

“Relative grading, eh,” Phattu exclaimed, “zero being the third highest score, actually got many people a good grade.”

We had some more random discussions about classes, life, etc. and after tea, Phattu left. We then had a quick discussion around our topics, and started the second round of readings. After a while, my eyes closed and I entered the land of nod. I heard some gunshots. There I was, running through the bushes, pursuing militants. It was around 0215hrs, a cold windy night and still quite dark, but we could still make out the lay of the land. I paused and gave a signal with my left hand to three of my men, to sit down to a side. I saw one of the militants, hiding behind a tree. As I got ready to take the next step, I heard someone calling me.

“Captain,” Dutta said, waking me up, “everyone’s sleeping, I also just woke up.”

Well, it was 4a.m. in the morning and everyone was fast asleep over the books/laptops. I took a quick photograph of the scene for sharing later and woke them up. We were finally done for the day. After they left, as I switched off the light, I remembered a course-mate singing, “You’re in the Army now” back in NDA days.

Now that song had changed for me to—“You’re in the IIM-A now.”

Half of the first term was now over, and I didn’t remember sleeping as a part of daily routine at all. The Faculty of course was “God level.” As they said—“IIM-A is IIM-A.” Many of the professors gave us the feeling of wanting to just get up, bow down and say one word—Respect .

It was soon time for the T-Nite or Talent Nite, which comprised of several inter-section competitions over a couple of days, culminating with a formal talent competition. Many of the alumni had already flown in to witness this year's T-Nite. The new name for our Section B was— Beagles . This was the time when the section bonding was at its peak. Every point mattered and every person had a role to play. After a lot of section publicity across the campus, slogan shouting, lot of fun, enthusiastic (and classic too) performances, the T-Nite phase got over. It was truly a great way to bring in all the zest, creativity,

competition, spirit of camaraderie and enthusiasm in the midst of all the academic rigor of IIM-A.

In a few weeks, our first semester final exams came up. One of our God-level Operations Management professors had said in the class once—“ The exam will be open book, i.e. you can carry your books. I'll share few old question papers as well. ”

He had then continued with a modest smile—“ However, from my experience it's all useless. Students have only wasted time fluttering through all the pages. Just apply the concepts we discussed in the class . ”

Yeah sure, was easy for him to say; was an arduous battle for us to conquer. The night-outs were accompanied as usual by loud gleeful slogans from Tuchchas —“ muggo fachcho muggo ” (study first year guys, study). These and other stress busters did help in easing out the figurative pressure cooker, many a times.

### Cupid Strikes Again

Our routine started for the next semester. In the study groups, there were all kinds of people—the Free riders (no contribution, only time pass), Program Manager (organizing and allocating responsibilities for assignments), joke cracker (making people laugh even in a funeral-farewell speech) and similar other categories. In this term, we had one more addition to the group—

Rajiv (a.k.a. MoCha), from ToTTi's dorm. Also, preparations began for “Chaos”—our gala annual cultural festival. I was part of a committee

whose responsibility was to reach out to all the colleges and invite them over. One of the days, I opened Orkut, which was the most happening social networking sites in India, in those days. The idea was to go to the communities of all the other B-schools, shortlist current students or alumni who could lead to a point-of-contact for the cultural committee, and send them the message. I drafted a well-written write-up and started the carpet-bombing of messages.

It so happened that most of the genuine profiles that I had sent my messages to, were those of girls (it just so happened—really).

It wasn't by design. My sole aim was getting contact details for Chaos . In addition to getting contacts, I also received a lot of

—“Oh my God, I've read about you,” “Very inspiring story,” “Hello Mr. Inspiration,” “Are you for real?” “Respect,” “I love you already,” “Hats off to your spirit,” and messages to that effect on my profile page.

Again, at the cost of immodesty, my online profile was impressive. One thing led to another and most of them ended up reading my story on the blog, and passed it on. In a way, I was happy since it worked well towards realizing the “purpose of my life” as well (sharing the message of not giving up). One of my (if I may) fans working in Google who had become a good friend, asked me to google my name one day. Lo and behold!

My blog link was right at the top, under “Sponsored by Google.”

Of course, it was only a temporary thing, but was one of those small things in life that make you smile. I thanked her immensely for the kind humble gesture.

“Read your blog...every word of it...every link...every post...all...don't know what to say...gives me goose bumps...I'm a big fan of yours”—

said one of the posts from Shreya, an alumnus of a B-school in Delhi.

This also led to chats on Gtalk with many newly found fans (primarily girls —really don't know why). Amongst all the fans that I had interacted with in

the last few days, there was only one whom I had started liking— Shreya . Shreya was sweet, witty and funny, and I really enjoyed chatting with her. She was vivacious—always full of energy even in chats. I had seen only one picture of her—the profile picture on Orkut, in which she was apparently sitting in some restaurant. She had mesmerizing eyes, and a beauteous radiant smile. The virtual image I'd created of her in my mind based on our chats was well, a work of art. One of the following nights, while finishing an assignment, I went online and we started chatting.

Her: “So Siddhant...I can call you Mr. Fauji , right?”

Me: “Sure, it’s a free country...can I call you by what you are...”

Ms. Charming ?”

Her: “Free country, as you said ;)...”

Her: “I gave your blog link to my friends...they were like...God, how did you come across such a guy... he seems so larger than life...”

Me: “Yeah well, things just fell in place...”

Her: “BTW, you messaged me, some of my juniors too, how many people —girls in all :)?”

Me: “Hah Hah, I was only doing my job ma’am...as for the number, lost count...really...”

Her: “How convenient, only doing your job :)...”

Me: “Look at my profile pic.... such an innocent-decent looking chap...”

Her: “Yeah, looks can be deceptive :)”

Me: “Oh, so you’re saying that you’re not the sweet innocent person smiling in your pic :)?”

Her: “That’s for you to find out...”

Me: “Ahem...”

Me: “So Ms. Charming , you belong to Ranchi, right?”

Her: “Yes Mr. Fauji , but Dad’s posting was in Kalimpong (near Darjeeling), that’s where I spent most of my years...”

Me: “During my stint in the Army, I was in Gangtok, near Nathu La for a couple of months.”

Her: “It’s a heavenly place, I’d love to go back sometime.”

Me: “Same here...”

It was good to find a commonality, and the chat went on until early morning. In a few days, we got on to speaking on phone. She was working in a bank after her MBA, and always had some or the other story on how she got into an argument with someone, and how that someone was sorted out—“nice and proper.” Her voice was sweet, always full of energy. She had an opinion on everything and I used to get lost during our talks, with a smile on my face.

The mind used to imagine her enthused self, speaking melodiously with so much intensity on any and every issue. It was cute. It’s not that I was falling for her or anything. It was just cute.

One of the following Saturday evenings, I had just started reading the WAC Case. WAC (Written Analysis and Communication, pronounced as “ wack ”) was one of the most critical subjects, and one that was reminisced distinctively by alumni across batches. It helped in inculcating analytical reasoning, critical thinking, proficient business writing skills, and the likes into us. Like the initial WAC submissions, a typical Saturday evening was spent in analyzing the case (also in watching bits of a latest movie), and then writing the WAC report only late at night. Deadlines are sacrosanct at IIM-A, and the report had to be submitted as a hard copy by Sunday afternoon 11.59.59 (not 12:00:00), in a classroom in new campus.

I finally finished writing the WAC report by early morning. It was now Sunday morning, and I had just finished taking the printout of my report.

“Hey RiFle, are you ready for WAC submission?” my friendly neighborhood Tuchcha asked, opening my door and showing a lot of concern.

“Yup, it’s only 1100hrs and I’m done with everything,” I said gladly, putting the WAC report inside a brown envelope.

“Awesome,” he said with a grin as wide as the ends of an ocean, and quickly stepped out.

Before I realized what was happening, my door had already been latched from outside.

“Oh no, not this time,” I shouted from inside, knowing what was going to happen next. I quickly called my other dorm-mates. It turned out, this was a well-organized mission and everybody was locked-up inside.

“We’ll leave you guys just in time, don’t worry,” the Tuchchas said from outside our rooms, on each of the floors, “where’s the fun if there’s no WAC run ?”

WAC run was the traditional unavoidable sprint of life to the new campus to meet the 11.59.59 deadline, caused by known/unknown iffy idiosyncrasies of life.

“It’s 11.49 guys,” one of the Fachchas shouted after some time.

“Ready, steady,” the Tuchchas exclaimed at the top of their voice, putting their hands on the latch, “Go!”

We shot out from our rooms like a missile, as the door opened. As I crossed the café, other Fachchas also joined the run, and many Tuchchas started stopping us playfully. Finally, after all the dodging and hurdle crossing, the heat-seeking missile finally hit the target. I submitted my report with 35 seconds to spare. We had ingrained into us the universal truth here—

deadlines indeed were sacrosanct. The grades were however, not related in any way to the amount of effort. One of the alumni had once quoted— “

After seeing the grades from a couple of WACs, you would never have false expectations from life anymore. ”

Over a period, I realized that I had started looking forward to the conversations with Shreya. The routine was set—a call in the evening and long chats at night.

I was boxing in this bout of life, with my guard-up. I had consciously decided NEVER to fall in love again. Yet, fate had brought in someone special, that I was starting to fall for.

I asked of myself one night.

“ Dude, are you ready to let your guard down now?” a part of me asked.

“ Maybe,” was the uncertain one word response from the other half of my mind.

“ Okay let me paraphrase, do you ‘want to’ let your guard down? ”

the next question came in.

“ Yes,” I smiled to myself, thinking about her, “ I like her — a lot .”

Anyway, I only liked her right now, so it was all good. I had given her the title of “The One,” an indirect indication about my

feelings. Of course, I had positioned that term to her with reference to the protagonist of the movie “The One.”

After a brief midterm break stay at home, I was back to IIM-A.

The busy routine started again, but there was always time for those few minutes on the phone.

“So, I told my colleagues, what I said to him. Huh!” Shreya said over the phone one of the evenings. I was sitting on my desk, and we were just speaking about this and that. Her sweet voice was music to my ears, irrespective of what she was talking about.

“Why your boss keeps tripping and falling on your wrong side, I fail to understand,” I said comically.

“He also never will,” she said shrugging away the thought.

“That too, knowing that you are the best performer in his team,”

I said, continuing that thought.

“Well Mr. Fauji , there are 1 or 2 more good people, but I accept that complement humbly,” she said.

“By the way Ms. Charming , I saw the latest pic you uploaded.”

“And?” she asked, gradually raising the notes of her tone.

“Gorgeous, ravishing, exquisite and words to that effect,” I said emphatically.

“Sure, you don’t need to flatter me because I keep praising you,”  
she said.

“I was actually talking about that painting behind you,” I said jovially.

“Oh...” she exclaimed in a sad tone playfully.

“No! No! I was talking about you Ms. Charming , you’re ‘The One,’

” I continued, looking at her pic on my laptop, “simply put, beautiful.”

“Thank you Mr. Fauji , sometimes my picture comes out well,” she said.

“Oh, so you’re Ms. Modesty as well, ma’am?”

“Look, who’s talking about being modest,” she said, “you’re the epitome of that, sir.”

Her voice brought in freshness and a burst of energy every time we talked, which definitely helped, given the arduous routine at IIM-A.

In a couple of months, it was time for the Summer Internship Interview process. There were sessions by the Tuchchas for all of us on how to crack the Summers’ interviews. They covered what to do (and what not to), solutioning approach for Consulting interviews, etc. and almost everything that we needed to know.

Few days were remaining for Day Zero to start. One evening, our Group got together for a quick meet to finish off the assignments.

“Guys all set for the interviews?” 3P asked cheerfully, opening her laptop.

“Yeah, what will transpire, will transpire,” I said, pointing up towards the sky.

“So says sage Captain,” ToTTi said, “you too got a Day Zero interview right?”

Day Zero was the first day of the Interviews and only handpicked companies came on that day. These companies – typically the I-Banks, Consulting or Retail giants, themselves called a handpicked lot for the interview.

“Yes, I’ve been short listed for an I-Bank, but my heart is more into Marketing/Strategy side,” I confessed, “you guys are more into Consulting/I-Banks, so that’s good”

“Except 3P,” MoCha said, “she’d probably get into a big shot Retailer.”

“I hope so,” 3P said with hope, and shining eyes.

This was one of the most grueling periods with everyone toiling his/her way to the bone, and sharpening the swords for the battle. My interview on Day Zero was good. They realized that I wasn’t an I-Banker material but wanted

to meet me (Ex-Army, high judicious risk taking ability, etc.) nevertheless. The entire placement process was an experience to treasure and most of us went for the chosen interview with an approach of—

“ I love your company (waiting to join you since Kindergarten days). This is what I think is happening in the industry and this is how I can help (and why you should take me) .”

I finally decided to go for an IT firm, in a Business Development role. The Gentleman who took the interview was one of the finest executives and interviewer that I had met till date. The scope of the two-month internship sounded promising. It was either going to be in their HQ in California, or in the Chennai office. There was another offer in hand, but I decided to take up the internship in IT (in spite of having no engineering/IT background whatsoever). The summers’ interview season finally got over, with everyone happy with his/her placement.

Life was going smoothly and we were a semester away from the end of the first year. I knew that I was falling in love with her, falling into a bottom less pit. One of the nights after our chat, I penned down some thoughts on my private blog.

“So... we had an interesting conversation today... about going to Kalimpong together and words to that effect... well, of course I like talking figuratively... leaving scope for different interpretations... she also does the same at times... harmless and naughty innuendos...

we keep throwing inconspicuous hints at each other .... There's a spark between us... guess the next step is to meet...”

Well, it was as if the Universe wanted to make this happen. Few days later I had to travel to Delhi, to get my right arm prosthesis (artificial arm) repaired. I booked an early morning onwards flight, and a late night one for return. It was time to meet, finally. The excitement on both sides of the phone was evident when I told her about the one-day trip.

There were many thoughts brewing, while I was waiting at the airport that Saturday morning. Is she this way with all her friends, or do I hold a special place? Will she be as special as I've pictured her to be? Will we go to the next level by the end of today? I hoped that she was thinking on the same lines as well. A few hours later, I landed at New Delhi airport.

“Hi Shreya, have you reached?” I said into my cell, as I looked around after stepping out of Arrival .

“I’m sitting near a CCD outlet,” she said, “wearing a black jacket and white-black striped scarf.”

I walked some distance and saw the CCD outlet.

“I can see that Zebra scarf ma’am,” I said with a mischievous smile. There she was; sitting on the table with legs folded and hands covered with gloves, seeming like a warm summer light on this winter morning. Beautiful than the most vibrant rainbow across a picturesque landscape, she was smiling sweetly. Her captivating eyes were looking for me in another direction.

I was wearing a nice cargo and a jacket, to cater to the cold winter morning of New Delhi. Fortunately, I didn’t wear my IIM-A T-shirt. Some of the statements on the T-shirts made the wearer seem egotistical. “Don’t you wish you were here,” one of them said. In fact, most of the batch-mates I knew were quite down-to-

earth in spite of the High IQ level, and all that they had achieved. Anyway, my smile widened as we came closer.

“Hi Ms. Charming ,” I said with the tone moving musically in a sine curve.

“Hi Mr. Fauji ,” she replied the same way, with flushed cheeks, “finally we meet.”

She looked very cute, all covered up and dressed smartly, thanks to the chill in the air. Shreya was definitely more beautiful than her picture.

“Good Morning ma’am, I’m Siddhant,” I chuckled, acting surprised, “and you are?”

“I come from outer space in peace,” she said pointing towards the sky with a grin, always ready with an answer, “Take me to your leader.”

“And your message is—‘Make Love not War?’ ” I retorted quickly.

Before she could give a witty reply, a cab stopped near us. I hoped she took the “make love not war” part in context of the Hippy movement of the 60s, and not anything else. In all of our talks, there were lots of sweet innuendos, harmless flirting, teasers, and what not. Yes, I definitely liked her—more than as a normal friend. This feeling seemed to be mutual. Only thing to be seen was—do we really take this to the next level by the end of this meeting, or retain status quo. I got down at the place from where I had my prosthesis made.

We met again after three hours in CP—Connaught Palace, once my work was over. It was still a chilly afternoon, with hint of sunlight in bits and pieces. However, after she arrived, the weather seemed more pleasant.

“So you don’t have any other work here, right?” she asked, as we stopped at a food joint and settled down.

“Nothing else and my flight is only at 10 PM ma’am,” I said, and added after a pause, “I’m all yours, today.”

“Excellent,” she said with an enthusing smile, and we looked at the Menu.

“You must try the Shawarma roll of this place, it’s yummy!” she said with sparkling eyes, and I called a waiter.

She then shared a few stories from happenings of the last few days. I got lost in her big beauteous eyes as she went on to explain things with full emotions. They went wide in amazement and then shrunk down as the tone changed. They went to the extreme left one instant, and the wide right in another. It was just like the way they show in some movies—with the Hero

listening to the dramatic description by the Heroine, and the entire scene happening in slow motion. After a while, we left the place; the Shawarma roll was delicious indeed.

We walked leisurely, enjoying each other's company. Thanks to 3P's suggestion, I had bought a small gift—a nice perfume bottle (hadn't even thought about it, until she asked me to take something at least). Pretty standard, yes, but that's what I could get given the speed at which this trip materialized.

“So, are you going ‘strong’ with anyone right now?” Shreya asked casually, looking through a few clothes as we passed a shop.

“Well, I’m not even going ‘weak’ for that matter, with anyone,” I stated.

“At least you’re not in the ‘I-don’t-trust-women-anymore’ zone now, right?” she asked, pausing and looking into my eyes.

“Yes and that’s all thanks to you,” I said gladly. Earlier, we had had a long chat one of the nights, when we discussed my breakup and all related things. By the end of the chat, she had convinced me to come out of that zone.

“So, do you have anyone in mind?” she continued, looking at some clothes randomly.

“I’m not sure. Do you have anyone in mind—for me?” I replied, as we kept talking indirectly and added after a pause, “someone I’ll like; someone like you maybe?”

“Maybe,” she said, pursing her lips, and quickly changed the topic, “let’s have a cup of coffee.”

It was evening by now. We had taken plenty of photos, and had been talking for hours. There were several moments when our eyes met for a trifle longer than normal, and then quickly looked away. The feelings were trying to fly across in invisible mode.

It felt as though we'd known each other for many years. She was smart, beautiful, and sweet, but more importantly I liked her as an individual. The level of comfort and closeness I felt with her was something special.

I knew that I would not be the one to share my feelings first.

What we had right now was too close to my heart, and not worth the risk of letting go because of any misunderstandings. She on the other hand had shared many times that ideally, a guy should propose first. Well, we were in a quandary.

“So, you’ll sing for me now, as you promised?” she asked, as we settled down for a coffee. There were many couples floating around, and love was in the air.

“Sure ma’am, which one?”

“Whichever you want to sing for me,” she said smiling mischievously, switching on the voice recorder of her cell. I looked at her, and knew just what my heart wanted to sing.

“Hmm.... Woh pehli baar, jab hum miley, haathon mei haath, jab hum chale,” I began the rendition of the song. I was looking into her eyes, and could see how flattered she was feeling—shying her eyes away and giving a can’t-resist-that-sweet-smile.

“So, when do I get my ‘surprise’ gift,” I asked her, as the song finished and she did an encore, “it can be something intangible as well.”

“What do you mean, Mr. Fauji ,” she asked looking at me naughtily.

“What I said is open to interpretation, not clarification,” I replied with a racy connotation.

I don’t know what I was expecting, or why I said that. It was clear that we were totally into each other. As the end of the meeting came nearer, perhaps I wanted to convey somehow that the ball was in her court. I did not want to

take the risk; but at the same time, take this to the next level too. I liked her so much.

Pathetic me!

After a few hours, and a few more songs, it was time to go. We stopped a cab, and started for the airport. We were now sitting relatively closer than how we were in the morning (in the cab).

“I’ll get down near ‘Dhaula Kuan,’ ” she said softly, as the cab started.

“I want to give you this,” she said after a while, handing over a nice key chain.

“Oh, that’s so sweet,” I said with a smile.

I was a bit sad that the gift was something tangible. I was also sad, because the meet hadn’t come to a logical conclusion—as to the next step.

There was a bit of uneasiness as both of us saw her stop approaching. My heart was thumping hard, and I knew that she was feeling the same way.

She gradually arose to get down as the cab stopped, and I looked into her eyes.

“Thanks for making my day,” she said softly and intently. “I also wanted to give you this.”

She quickly bent forward, gave a small friendly peck on my left cheek and started to get down from the cab.

“Come here,” I said, pulling her back instinctively, and we had our first kiss.

Time froze, as the vociferous sound of traffic seemed muted. Love was in the air, our feelings no more convoluted. We wished the time to stop, and go at a slow pace. Our hearts cuddled lovingly, in a mesmerizing embrace. Pent-up feelings unraveled, life seemed blissful. What happens next—who knew, but it was going to be beautiful.

Before we realized what happened, she was down and the cab driver shot off like a bullet. We were both in a state of trance. I smiled; I smiled a long smile, for a long time. My instincts had taken that “friendly” peck as a confirmation that yes, the feelings were mutual. What could be better than being loved, by someone you love?

“So, what happened really happened, right?” she asked, when I called her after reaching the airport.

“Nothing beats the first kiss,” I said, “as they said in ‘50 First Dates.’ ”

“Nothing beats the first kiss,” she replied, sounding still in a trance, “that was a nice movie by the way.”

“I still have butterflies in the stomach, and all phrases to that effect,” she continued sweetly.

“So, does it mean...?” I asked, modulating the tone gradually to end with a question.

“It had been in the air for a long time Mr. Fauji ,” she said. I could imagine her smiling as she continued, “Only yesterday I was writing a private diary. I’m reading out a few lines verbatim.

Where do I stand in his life? Does he even think about me when we don’t chat? There is no escaping his charm. My heart skips a beat when I see his name on my cell. Does he feel the same way? Am I only ‘one’ of his many fans, or am I really ‘The One,’ as he says?”

“You were always ‘The One’ Ms. Charming ,” I said, smiling beamingly at her image in my mind, “You were always ‘The One,’ and I really ‘like’ you very much.”

“Hmm...me too, but I can’t get to put that in words right now,” she said, “I will, soon enough.”

“No hurry ma’am, you have all the time in the world. I won’t ask you to say anything till let’s see,” I said jokingly and paused to see my watch, “it’s 2100hrs by my watch, you have two hours before I land.”

“Talk to you later at night, Mr. Fauji, ” she whispered back.

Yes, we were both a couple in love and it had happened. She was

—“The One,” the one for me. In the next two days, I moved on to declaring “I Love you,” and she got to that, a few days after that. Of course, the relationship status on the social community also changed to Committed .

A few weeks later, the Chaos cultural fest started. I got a first-hand experience of how a college fest looks like, that too one of the biggest and best one. It was awesome—the campus vibrant with a large number of participants, exciting events, cultural programs and what not. The best experience was that of absolute ecstasy, seeing one of my favorite singers—KK performing live, two meters next to me.

### Up, Up And Away

Soon enough, it was time for our summer internship. After a short touch-and-go trip to Delhi and home, I flew to Chennai. During the next two months at the company, I got the first whiff of corporate culture. However, unlike how I had imagined things would be in the corporate world, a set of core values defined this company. Another good part was that I got to dress smartly—

with a Tie and all the works. In the last week, one of the editors from the newsletter team of the company (who had read about me), took a small interview.

“Your first year must’ve been rigorous?” she asked.

“Well, the NDA designed me as a stealth attack powerful Army tank,” I said with a smile, throwing a figurative answer at the editor. “IIM-A dismantled me piecemeal, and is now creating a stupendous commercial airliner. So you can imagine the ‘rigor’

part of it.”

“I can only imagine, but you have ‘walked’ the talk,” she chuckled, stressing on walked . “So Siddhant, what’s your first impression about our company.”

“It has been an enriching experience, but most importantly I’m impressed by the values and culture of the organization.”

“Those words inscribed on the walls—‘Humility, Humanity and Integrity,’ are tangible,” I said, pointing towards the metallic letters engraved on the wall, while she acknowledged. “These words are not just for the sake of showcasing on the website, but core building blocks and values that are evinced by every employee I’ve come across.”

“Absolutely, that’s the spirit of our associates,” she said proudly. “So how would you compare the two professions—Army and the corporate life?”

“There are two faces to every coin. But the important thing to note here is—Army is not a profession, it’s a ‘way’ of Life,” I said remembering the good old times. “Given a chance, I would go back to my Olive Greens, at the drop of a hat.”

Well, that was the truth. The interview got over in a while. At the end of the internship, the company gave me a PPO—Pre Placement Offer. I had still not decided and final placements were a year away. However, I knew that I would love to work at this company.

The second year began with full vigor and we were now the Godly Tuchchas imparting pearls of wisdom to the new offspring (batch) on the campus. In the last month of the previous semester, there was an online bidding for 2 nd year courses. It was a full-blown online bidding with points based on our grades. Most of the subjects that I had chosen were on Marketing and Strategy, conducted by the “who’s-who” in those areas. One of the evenings, I was sitting with Phattu, who was my new group mate for a Brand Management course.

“We have a couple of common courses this year,” I said, moving his laptop to a side and looking at the timetable stuck on his notice board (with the list of subjects). “You’ve taken ‘Business French’ too?”

“Yeah, and those too,” Phattu said indicating towards a few circled ones, “will probably help me when I become an entrepreneur.”

“Is it also because most of the Exchange students will take up these courses?” I asked winking, “and I’m hinting towards the feminine gender.”

“Hah Hah, that too,” he said, “I’ve already attended two exchange parties.”

Well, it was definitely a good experience studying with the exchange students, who had come from other countries. It threw in a new perspective in classroom discussions, better cultural understanding and of course, a welcome sea of new (read beautiful

) faces.

“Give me five minutes,” he said as his door opened, and few Fachchas of his dorm came in. “I had asked them to just barge-in, in the evening for some ‘ gyan .’ ” He started giving the pointers.

“You guys have all been toppers, more or less,” he said emphatically. “By the mid of first semester, your ego (if any remaining) will be stripped and then ripped apart.”

We gave some more gyan while they listened to the pearls of wisdom.

“Things are going to be tough, and some people might not do well,” Phattu said, and broke into a smile as their expression changed. “Don’t worry, others might do worse. It’s all relative.”

“For those who are worried, keep your head above the water, keep swimming, and you’ll reach the shore,” I said calming there nerves, “as they say— this too shall pass .”

“ Muggo Fachcho Muggo ,” Phattu exclaimed in a loud voice happily, and we stepped out for a cup of tea.

In the second year, life wasn't going to be all fun. But compared to first year, we now had time to take part in hobby clubs, games in the evening, campus events—Niche, Confluence, etc. and all such things. On the other front, things were going good. We had met a number of times in the last few months. We had enjoyed a fair share of “we-are-a-couple” moments, and of course had some skirmishes as well. One of the long weekends, she had gone to Agra with some of her friends. The day I came to know about this trip (few days back), an idea buzzed through my mind. I made a few phone calls, chalked out a plan and booked the flight (without telling her).

“The ‘Taj Mahal’ is so beautiful,” Shreya said on the phone after coming back to her room. She went on for a while, visibly (rather audibly) excited about the events of the day.

“Awesome, you had quite an experience,” I said and continued,

“So, you guys are free for the evening?”

“Yeah, nothing else planned for today,” she said, “tomorrow morning we’re going to one place and then we’ll leave for Delhi.”

“In the evening, can you take out time and go to that Army Officers’ Mess I had told you once about?” I beseeched her.

“Okay, but why?” she asked, surprised by the question.

“Yeah well,” I said after a deliberate pause, “I thought it’ll be a good idea to meet, given that I’m here as well?”

“You’re here?” she exclaimed happily at a high tone.

“You’re here!” she said again, this time in her sweet mellifluous voice, “Wow, I’m leaving in half an hour.”

So, part one of the surprise worked out well. I had spoken to one of my junior officers posted here, and everything else fell in place smoothly. Shreya finally reached after an hour; a pretty damsel gliding down the path. She was wearing a trendy skirt and

a red top, with conspicuous silver danglers in the ear that swayed from side-to-side.

She had the beauty of an Angel, grace of (potentially) an Army Officer's wife, vigor of stormy oceans, intellect of the highest order, and an adorability quotient that was unbeatable. Well, it was worth the wait. We spent some quality time in "long-time-no-see" discussions and left for having dinner in the Officers' Mess itself.

After dinner, I took her to the terrace. The view from the terrace was amazing. It was a full moon night, and the Taj Mahal was shimmering in the moon light far away.

"Wow!" Shreya exclaimed, and just stood there mesmerized, with folded hands.

I looked at her, as she unconsciously slid her hands over her ears, looking ahead in amazement. Her resplendent eyes were shining by another notch in this moonlit night. I quietly moved towards my laptop, while she was looking ahead, and started a soft song. It was Richard Marx's "Right here waiting."

"Aw, that's sweet," she said turning around, "was the laptop here all this while?"

"Yup, please bring your ravishing self here ma'am," I said.

"Okay sir," she said and came over to the soft carpet I was standing on.

"Shreya," I said softly, moving closer to her.

"Yes?" she asked amorously. I took her hand and went down on one knee.

"Before I met you, my life was very boring—monotonous," I said, looking up at her.

"Aw..." Shreya said with her sweet smile, as she realized what was happening.

“People came, people went, but you’re the only one who has made an impact and made me feel special. With you, my life has a meaning and I know that you love me, more than anything else.”

“Okay?” she said sweetly, entranced in the moment.

“Today I promise you that if you marry me, I’ll spend the rest of my life in keeping you happy—always. So...” I looked down and stopped to clear my throat. When I looked up again, there she was, smiling her gorgeous smile, waiting for the formal question.

“So, although deep in my heart, I know that you’ll say ‘Yes.’

Nevertheless, Ms. Shreya Sahay, will you marry me?”

“Yes of course, my ‘life,’ ” she said in her aphrodisiacal voice as I got back on my feet, “I love you.”

We embraced deeply, our lips met for a ceaseless passionate kiss, and it felt as though there were firecrackers bursting in the sky, celebrating the moment.

“This was all so special,” Shreya said, as we looked at each other, and then at the symbol of love in far distance.

“Let’s make it a tad more special,” I said and moved aside a makeshift screen, kept in the corner. Behind the screen, I had hidden a small round table, chairs, a champagne bottle, chocolate cake, candles and a bouquet of roses. Well, I had arranged for everything just in time.

“Hmm...picture perfect,” she exclaimed, looking at the sight, as I lit the candles.

We lived that moment thoroughly under the clear starry skies, and a magnificent backdrop. Love was in the air and we spent some time listening to romantic songs, and discussing stuff.

The next day, I went along with her friends for the last sightseeing stop, and then we parted ways—at least for now.

The fourth semester breezed away with the usual set of interesting courses, lot of learning, events, and fun. My love life was going on smoothly as well. The only obvious hiccup was that her family wasn't agreeing. One of the Saturdays, I had flown to Hyderabad where her parents were staying with her elder brother. The lunch meeting as such went well, and there was constructive conversation. They were polite and humble, and I hoped they like me as well. They appreciated what I had achieved, and bid farewell with a positive good bye. However, it was a "No"

to Shreya.

I understood her family's perspective. There was nothing against me as a person. Individually, perhaps each of her two brothers, mother and father would have partially agreed. However, given the facts of the case, this was not a logical and straightforward decision to make. There were many difficult moments following that meeting, where we had to show perseverance and stay afloat in the face of this storm. By nature, Shreya was strong willed and tenacious. We knew that as long as we're together, there's no insurmountable hurdle. On a lighter note, what good is a love story if it's mundane and there's no opposition at all, right?

One of the following days, she wrote a nice poem dedicated to me.

She had a way with words and wrote beautifully. Well, I wasn't that bad either and penned down a few lines.

"I was walking a lonely path, aloof and alone; Bliss was the next stop, I hadn't known.

Then came an angel, brighter than thy eyes could see; I asked of myself — could this be 'The One' for me?

Side by side, we walked along; Nights seemed shorter, days seemed long.

Time whizzed by and distances began to pare; sure enough, there was something in the air.

One fine day, the momentous moment came; when cupid struck, the dude and the dame.

Sweet words flew across, that beauteous night; those starry skies had never been so bright.

A voice from the sky, smiled on me; 'All that is beautiful is thine to be.'

Walking on the path, no more alone; bliss is all around, Love has only grown.

I have an angel, brighter than thy eyes could see; she is the one, 'The One' for me."

She made me happy, made me laugh, made me feel alive and look forward to an awesome future together, and most importantly—she cared. I loved her for the person she was, deep inside. Yes, I was deeply in love.

The Placement season was quite an experience for the batch. We were passing out in 2009—at the peak of recession. In spite of the bad times, all of us got into the companies we preferred. I decided to join the company I'd done the summers with and accepted my PPO. After a few months, it was time for the Convocation ceremony. A day before the Convocation, Mom, Vanshika and I flew to Hyderabad to meet Shreya's parents. They had agreed in principle by now and in the meeting, everything turned out well. Our engagement date was fixed as March 29th, the day after my Convocation and the wedding was tentatively scheduled for June. Although we hardly spoke to each other that evening, we were elated. Everything had turned out just fine.

Next day, we had our illustrious convocation ceremony. It seemed as though our time at IIM-A had gone away in a jiffy. I was definitely going to miss the 1230hrs group meets that actually started at 0200hrs after all the worldly talks, the staying up

late to finish assignments but taking out time to watch movies on campus LAN as well, the midnight Maggie from the Café and the long stroll to

“Ram bhai” for a cup of tea + chat. I was also going to miss the die-hard sleepers of Section B, the 23.59.59

submission deadlines, the MAN(i)AC quizzes, campus wide enthusiasm during the Talent-nights, energetic tempo-shouts, last minute WAC runs even in the 2 nd year, God-level professors and the impregnable bonding between all the batch-mates. We were now alums of IIM-A.

Life was going on smoothly for now, on all fronts. I was treading on the right path towards the ultimate need of man. The need that is “mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive”—“peace of mind.” My mantra for Life was straightforward. It’s not what you’ve lost, but what you “HAVE IN HAND,” that matters. Life is iffy, unpredictably more than we can ever fathom. It’s not reminiscing the past or dreaming the future, but “LIVING TODAY,”

that matters.

“The wings had feathered, next steps taken, past forgotten and taken in stride;

With a smile to spare and head held high, I ventured into the endless sky;

Life is an iffy sine curve; in the climb on the hill, I might yet again fall down;

What will take any of us “there” is—do we sit with regret, or get up and move on.”

END

# Epilogue

Few years passed by, Shreya and I were working in the same IT Company. We were happily married and blessed with a sweet angelic daughter named Rishika, who was now 1.5 years old.

“Siddhant, come quickly,” Mom exclaimed beamingly, from her room one day.

“Yes Mom,” I said and entered to see Mom and Shreya smiling at Rishika, who was gazing at Mom’s Laptop sweetly.

“Just wait and see her reaction,” Shreya chuckled, and we all looked at her.

“Hi,” Rishika exclaimed with full energy and a cute smile, waving at the laptop happily.

I looked at the laptop, and couldn’t help but smile. She was actually waving at Lord Shiva’s photo on Mom’s laptop, in which his palms were facing forward (in the position of giving blessings).

“Hi,” she said again, looking innocently at the peaceful image on the monitor, waving her cute little hands vigorously.

“Come here my child,” I said sitting down, as she came running into my open arms. “Thine is this life to live to the fullest, may you flow like musical notes off a humming guitar; may you soar high in the sky through Life’s troughs and crests, and have the sheen of the shiniest star.”

It was a pleasure watching her grow, with a new aspect added to her identity, almost every day. Parenthood had left us captivated with responsibilities anew, and moments of sheer joy and happiness. Well, there were those of concern too, many a times. I was grateful to the one above, for bringing this beauteous change in our lives and sought blessings for all the good/bad times ahead.

One of the following Sundays, a few college students requested for a short interview, for their Cultural magazine. I gave them a time of 1100hrs sharp on Sunday; meeting point was a neighboring Café Coffee Day. The one important message I averred and wanted to pass on was—“ It’s all in the mind .” Also, sometimes sh\*t happens, and life—well, it goes on.